CASH GORMAN

(THE WIZARD)

AUG. '41

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

MURDER IN SANTA PAULA

10 CENTS

AUG • 1941

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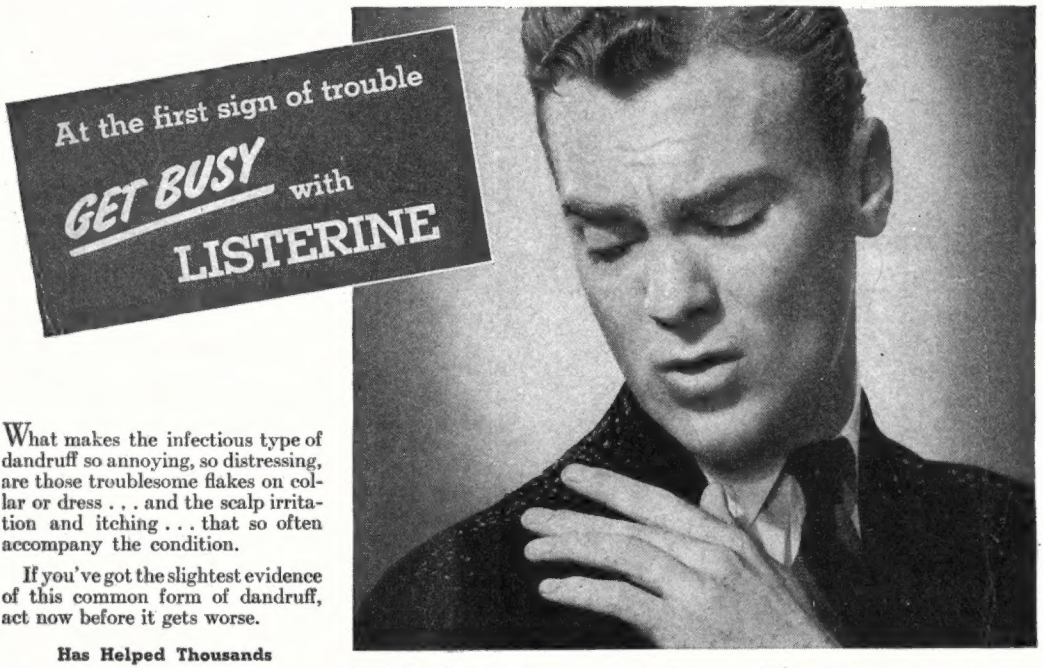

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CASH GORMAN

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

MURDER IN SANTA PAULA . . . Phil R. Sheridan . . . 9

A California town, lying complacently in a fertile valley under the dictatorship of a political boss, bursts suddenly into a seething incubator of murder and intrigue. Cash Gorman is called to the aid of a conservative banker friend, who has invested in the real-estate development centering around the newly constructed Grande Valle dam and Santa Paula. One look at the dam convinces Jimmy Ranger, Cash's aid and once an engineer, that there is something unnatural about its construction and layout. But even Jimmy's suspicions do not foresee the havoc which is to engulf Santa Paula and sweep through the rich valley. Cash finds himself in a death struggle with the shadowy chief of the territory, Mayor Kobb.

SHORT STORIES

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The amazingly versatile little promoter sets a strange stooge to his Herculean endeavors.

INFORMATION SQUEEZE . . . . Arthur Mann . . . 100

The Feder brothers return to the wars and the fortunes of Ace Promotions, Inc., surge upward for a brief moment.

DEPARTMENT

LARCENY IN THE WIND AGAIN 6

COVER BY HUBERT ROGERS

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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Larceny In The Wind Again

● Cash perceives an aura. Two characters return.

THE dictators overseas have been commanding more than their share of world attention in recent years; a situation which the Allies hope to remedy. But, meanwhile, some of our own home-grown dictators of the city-boss variety have been causing a bit of rumpus on this side of the water. The reason we bring this fact to your notice is that Cash Gorman, our free-lance financial adventurer, tangles with a California city boss in the complete novel, "Murder In Santa Paula," which begins on page 9 of this issue.

It seems that Martin Rossi—Cash's staid, conservative banker friend, who has always, incidentally, frowned on the fancy manipulations Cash has performed in outswindling the swindlers—has got himself in a bit of a jam. The jam centers about the Grande Valle real-estate development, which territory is within the province of Mayor Kobb, overlord of Santa Paula. Rossi sends for Cash, who arrives accompanied by Jimmy Ranger. A few sniffs of the air around Santa Paula convince both Cash and Jimmy that there is definitely a faint trace of larceny in the wind.

● ● ●

Ye olde editor received an interesting letter from an avid fan down in Winnebow, Louisiana. The writer, Thomas Brockett, clamors for longer editorial pages, among other things, so we'll let him help fill this one:

> The idea of changing the name of the magazine was, in my opinion, very appropriate. As you said, it makes Cash the magazine instead of just a character in it. Now, about the book-length novel. It will never do! A book-length novel only seventy pages long! Sir, that is preposterous! Something must be done, Ed.; we can't have this going on. As to the editor's page, how about making that longer and more of an editorial? The novels, as far as they go, are grand, superb. My one complaint is that they don't go far enough!
>
> THOMAS BROCKETT.

We thank Mr. Brockett publicly for his letter. It's full of complaints, but they are the kind of complaints an editor likes to get.

● ● ●

Two familiar characters appear in the back of this issue. Ross Russell brings back that dynamo of promotional activity, Hyman Goldfarb, in another episode in the land of the rising double cross, Florida. This time it's "Goldfarb's Great Regatta," and it begins on page 83.

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Start with a screwy invention, add a dash of salesmanship in the ebullient personage of Joe Feder, shake well inside a racy story, serve with the icy restraint of Jake Feder and you have the latest incident in the exciting development of Ace Promotions, Inc. Arthur Mann presents the return engagement of the Feder brothers on page 100 in "Information Squeeze."

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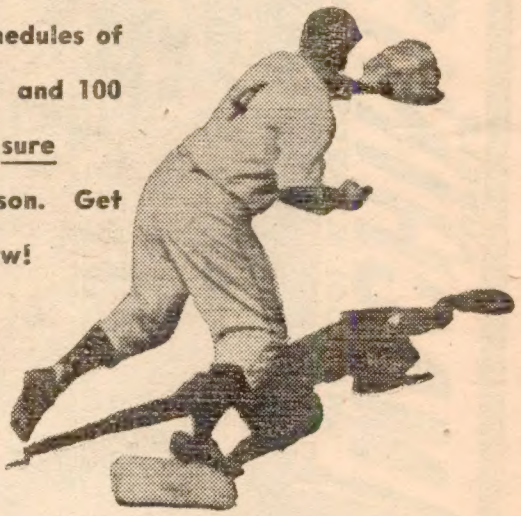

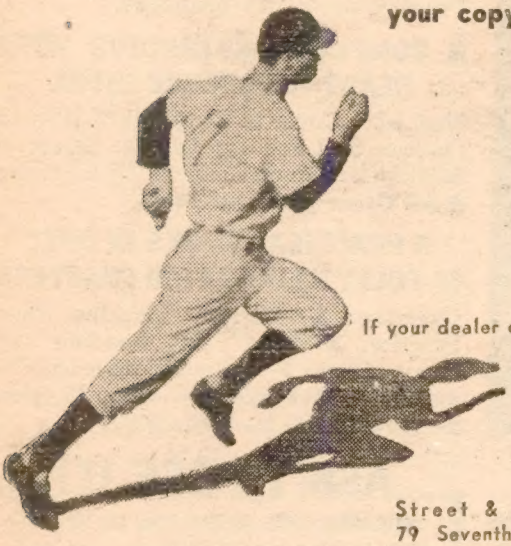

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MURDER IN Santa Paula

BY PHIL R. SHERIDAN

• Cash fights dictatorship and murder in the shadow of the Grande Valle development.

MARTIN ROSSI nervously adjusted his horn-rimmed spectacles and scanned the sky over the Palm Springs airport.

"Crane should be here any minute," he muttered, glancing at his wrist watch. "He said he'd be in about two-thirty."

Thomas Jefferson Gorman, sometimes called Cash by his associates, stretched

his long legs and slouched comfortably down in the front seat of the long, copper-colored convertible so that his head rested on the leather upholstery. He surveyed the small, dark-faced little man beside him with amused eyes.

"You should have been a bookkeeper instead of a banker, Martin," Jeff said, winking across Rossi at Jimmy Ranger, his assistant, who was leaning disconsolately against the wheel and wishing he was back at the pool of the Palomar Hotel instead of sweltering under the desert sun. "Your conservative soul was never meant for wrestling with mysterious problems like this."

Rossi was annoyed and, for the first time since his arrival in Palm Springs the previous evening to talk with Jeff, he showed it.

"This isn't any laughing matter, Cash," he snapped. "The bank has close to twenty million dollars tied up in the Valle Grande. Possibly that's amusing to you, but to me it's very serious." He took off his glasses and wiped them irritably with his handkerchief, his round brown eyes snapping at Jeff. "And I *was* a bookkeeper in case you're interested—and a damned good one."

Jimmy Ranger looked at Rossi approvingly. "I'm a C. P. A., did you know that?" he asked, his broad, boyish face beaming proudly beneath his unruly scrub of tow-colored hair.

Rossi's eyebrows lifted with genuine interest. "I thought you were an engineer."

"I'm an engineer, too, but engineering was a slightly overloaded profession when I took up with Cash," Ranger said. "I had to take up accounting so I could keep up with his balance sheets."

"You have my sympathy," Rossi said, smiling wryly. "Personally, I can't see how anyone with a well-balanced mind could retain his sanity in the vicinity of your employer."

Jeff grinned. "Have your fun, boys," he said. "By the way, Martin, you have a normally balanced mind, don't you?"

Rossi cast a suspicious sidelong glance at Jeff. "So I've been told."

"And I presume all the other officers of the Banca California, San Francisco, also have well-balanced minds?" Jeff pursued, smiling pleasantly.

Rossi's lips compressed themselves in a tight line, but his eyes showed some amusement as he silently refused to permit himself to walk into this verbal mousetrap.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Mr. Rossi," Jimmy Ranger said. "He's just showing off—going to ask you why the well-balanced bank stuck its neck out so far it had to come to the big, bad speculator to learn the time of day."

Jeff Gorman threw back his head and let go a roaring laugh, his teeth flashing white in a weather-tanned face and his deep, black eyes sparkling with amusement. He was not a particularly good-looking man, but the keenness of his face and the unceasing alertness of his intense eyes commanded attention. His high cheekbones and a long, thin nose with a slight knob at the bridge, as if it had been broken once, might have given his countenance a ruthless look were it not for his mouth, which was wide and generous. His age might have been anywhere in the early thirties and he looked as if he enjoyed being alive, particularly when he laughed.

"That's what you shouldn't have said, Jimmy," he told his assistant, laughing again at the fleeting expression of embarrassment and irritation which passed over Rossi's countenance. "Martin has an idea that he's been very coyly whetting our interest in his mysterious prob-

lem in the Valle Grande by letting us in on a little confidential shop talk—just so we'll go up there for free and snoop around a bit in search of larceny. Come on, Martin, 'fess up."

Rossi, vice president in charge of the mortgage-loan department of the Banca California, permitted himself a small smile. He had first met Thomas Jefferson Gorman when Jeff was attending college, the younger man having coolly made an appointment with him during banking hours to discuss a "business matter" and then, with equal coolness, had solicited his patronage for the Golden Gate Shoe Shining Corp., "Bonded bootblacks to shine or clean all shoes twice weekly—articles called for and delivered, Thomas Jefferson Gorman, president." A week later, Rossi had been somewhat astonished when a bonded bootblack had informed Mrs. Rossi that he also could obtain bonded liquor for her and deliver it to the door on his biweekly polishing visits.

"Aren't you running quite a risk, young man?" the banker had asked young Jeff when next he saw him.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Jeff had replied, innocently.

"One of your bootblacks is also bootlegging," Rossi remarked.

Jeff's youthful eyesbrows had shot up in convincing amazement. "Really? Well, I wouldn't know about that. However, if it's good liquor I have no objections as long as they polish your shoes to your satisfaction. I can't control their extra-curricular activities."

"May I ask how you make any money shining shoes twice weekly at our house at a flat rate of a dollar and a half a week—polish, wages and gasoline allowances for your men must come to more than that."

"Oh, the men furnish their own polish and gasoline," Jeff had told him. "And they get the one dollar and fifty cents."

Rossi had blinked. "And you have the nerve to sit there and tell me you have no interest in liquor. How do you make a profit?"

"My profits come from the fifty dollars a week the men pay me for the shoe-shine routes I obtain for them—all in the best residential districts, of course," Jeff had answered, unsmiling. "They must find the dollar-a-week fee profitable, because I understand some of them retain regular bootblack firms to actually do the shoe polishing."

Ever since, Rossi had been horrified at the unorthodox nature of the younger man's financial ventures and the violent fluctuations in Gorman's bank balance, a factor which caused Jeff to enjoy the present situation thoroughly.

"I suppose," he said, "that if I had listened to you, I would now be loaded down with Valle Grande real estate and imminently threatened with bankruptcy."

The banker ignored this comment. "Actually, Cash, I only came up here to meet Gordon Crane," he said. "However, I won't deny that I was glad to see you—"

Jeff grinned. "You can't. Fifteen minutes after you telephoned yesterday to find out if I was here, I was informed of your call."

Rossi looked a bit startled. "Who told you?"

Jeff took a fold of currency, composed mostly of high-denomination bills from his pockets and riffled through them casually with his thumb, remarking with pseudo innocence: "I know this particular form of exhibitionism appalls you, Martin, but you'd be surprised at the solicitous interest people take in my welfare. Their anxiety to keep me well informed is quite frequently touching,

particularly at hotels and such."

Rossi made a disapproving noise in his throat. "Very well, Cash, I *would* appreciate it if you'd take an interest in this matter. Of course, it might not amount to anything, but, on the other hand, it might be very important. That's why I was so anxious to have you out here with me when I meet young Gordon Crane."

Jeff studied the older man thoughtfully. "Stop being a Mysterious Mortimer, Martin. We'll admit that you have intrigued us with your report of the telephone call from this fellow Crane in Santa Paula, but you can't convince us that bankers like yourself are thrown into a panic by crackpot telephone calls. The properties you people hold mortgages on up there in Valle Grande are not just going to evaporate into thin air. What is it that you are *not* telling us about the situation?"

ROSSI jerked his head toward Jeff in annoyance and spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I'm not withholding anything, Cash. I sincerely don't know anything more about it than you do, but if you could have heard Crane's voice you would have realized that whatever it is he wants to talk to me about is a serious matter. And Gordon Crane is no crackpot. I've known him for years and I knew his father. In times like these, anything can happen. The bank couldn't afford to ignore a message like that. You might almost call it a warning."

Jeff shrugged his shoulders skeptically. "The bank has auditors, trained real-estate appraisers, investigators and Heaven knows you have access to practically every source of information there is —why are you coming to me?"

"From what Crane said, it occurred to me that if there was any foundation to his statements, your experience in, ah—" Rossi paused, delicately, fumbling for the right word.

"Larceny," Jimmy Ranger put in, casually.

Jeff laughed, as Rossi nodded his head.

"Not that your own part in these transactions hasn't been absolutely ethical," the banker added hurriedly. "As a matter of fact, in several instances you have undoubtedly saved legitimate investors considerable sums of money—"

"You're putting it mildly, to say the least, Martin," Jeff said, complacently. "Of course, we always skim a bit of cream off the top for ourselves and that brings up a point." Jeff slouched even farther down in the seat and pushed his hat forward over his eyes, continuing lazily: "I don't want you to think I'd take advantage of a poor little half-billion-dollar business while the directors are walking around wringing their hands. Sordid considerations of money are, in fact, farthest from my mind, but still I am puzzled—"

"Eh?" Rossi asked.

Jimmy Ranger translated. "He means, what's there in this for us?"

"Well, in a way, Mr. Ranger is correct," Jeff affirmed. "Of course, he put it crudely and used the editorial 'we,' uncalled for when you consider the fact that Jimmy, even as you, Martin, prefers a regular stipend rather than a share of the swag—"

"Stop giving yourself airs just because you have a faithful employee," Jimmy interrupted him. "I get my weekly stipend when we are rolling in the stuff. When we're broke, you not only don't pay me, you borrow back my conservatively invested funds."

"Which you graciously permit me to

have at ten percent interest," Jeff amended. "However, to get back to the Valle Grande—means Great Valley, doesn't it?"

Rossi nodded.

"Well, what *is* there in it for me?" Jeff asked.

Rossi removed his horn-rimmed spectacles and folded them, staring intently at the almost deserted airfield before them. "Possibly something of interest, but first let's review the situation," he said. Extending his index finger, he tapped it with his spectacles for emphasis, continuing: "First, we have the general situation in the valley. That is, the new Valle Grande dam, which will be formally opened next month, will make the valley one of the richest agricultural areas in the United States. Secondly, it will make the Valle Grande additionally attractive from an industrial standpoint because of the hydroelectric project which will be operated in connection with the dam."

"When did they start building that dam?" Jeff interposed.

"Four years ago," Rossi told him. "She's a beauty, too. She'll back the water up behind her into a fifty-mile-long lake—make nice resort property."

"Who's building the dam?"

"Valle Grande County—that includes the city of Santa Paula, of course," the banker declared.

"That's Lou Kobb's bailiwick, isn't it?" Jeff asked.

Rossi nodded. "Do you know Mayor Kobb?"

"No, but I've heard a lot about him," Jeff replied. "As a matter of fact, I saw him last night shooting craps over at the casino just after I left you. Pleasant face."

Jeff was startled at the fleeting expression of alarm which crossed Rossi's face.

"You saw him *here?*" the banker asked.

Jeff nodded, watching Rossi closely. He had a feeling that Rossi was momentarily confused, but the banker covered up quickly. "Did you really think he had a pleasant face," he asked.

"No," Jeff replied, recalling Kobb's granitelike countenance. "Are the stories about him true?"

"He's a political boss, if that's what you mean," Rossi said.

"Well, from what I've heard and read, he's a political boss to end all political bosses," Jeff commented. "Runs the place with totalitarian efficiency."

Rossi pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Newspapers are inclined to exaggerate those things, I think. Anyway, to continue with the Valle Grande—"

"Just a minute," Jeff said. "If Valle Grande County built this dam, Kobb had a finger in the pie, didn't he?"

"Yes, to a certain extent—" Rossi said, somewhat hesitantly. "Naturally, being a county project, he was concerned. He was one of the advocates of the dam. However, we were, too, for that matter, and nothing much can be done in Valle Grande County without Kobb's consent, but this particular project was a good, sound undertaking. Without exaggeration, Cash, the valley may some day rival the San Fernando and a number of industries are already building new plants in the outskirts of Santa Paula, including several which are expanding to fill defense orders, among them an airplane factory."

"All in all, it makes a nice, prosperous picture," Jeff commented dryly. The more he heard about the Valle Grande from Rossi and the more he observed the latter's nervous concern over a wild tele-

phone call, the more convinced he was that Rossi was not telling him all he knew about the situation. "How about the irrigation project—when does that get under way?"

"It's already under way," Rossi told him. "The dam isn't quite finished, but far enough along to permit irrigation of the valley."

Jeff frowned. "How about land values."

"Strong," Rossi reported. "Still advancing, as a matter of fact. After all, water is just coming to the valley. Of course, there's always been farming, but only in a belt along the banks of the Rio Valley, which isn't very wide nor deep. I've seen times when it was practically dry. Now water will be guaranteed all year around; which makes the entire situation Crane hinted at seem all the more mysterious. I . . . I don't understand it. If I didn't know he was level-headed—"

"In other words, there would be no reason to feel worried about anything were it not for Crane's call," Jeff said. "Exactly what did he tell you—I mean his precise words?"

Rossi hesitated reflectively. "Let's see, he said: 'There's a conspiracy afoot here that will drive property valuation in the valley down so fast that you people will lose millions. These fellows are completely ruthless—the men who are engineering it.' I pressed him for details, but he wouldn't tell me anything further over the telephone. One thing more he said was: 'I'm in a dangerous position—physically dangerous.' Then he said he'd have to speak to me personally and—"

Rossi's voice trailed off into a whisper and a startled, suspicious expression flooded his face. Following the banker's eyes, Jeff looked up to find a car sliding into a parking position between their own automobile and the hangar. Next to the driver, who looked like a detective bodyguard to Jeff, was Mayor Kobb.

"Hi-ya, Martin," the mayor called out, his lips parting in a brief, cold smile. "Glad to see you." His eyes swept briefly over Jeff and Jimmy Ranger, dismissing Jimmy and returning to Jeff for a second and more careful study. Kobb's eyes were clear, gray and cold, and as the Santa Paula mayor stared at him, Jeff was unpleasantly aware of the impersonal, unblinking intensity. Kobb's eyes were so impersonal in their inspection that it was almost as if two lenses were mechanically recording a picture and an analysis of him and filing it away on the brain behind the eyes. The Santa Paula mayor's face was long, horselike. The skin was mottled red and firm. The man was perhaps fifty, tall and heavy-chested. His hands were big. Physically, he looked hard and fit, like a ring champion who had retired unscarred and kept himself in condition throughout his life. Jeff returned his stare with interest.

Kobb's reputation was not enviable, but it was, at least, distinctive. A Santa Paula businessman who had once complained to Mayor Kobb that he had been subjected to unwarranted indignity at the hands of the police had been asked: "Don't you like it?"

"No, I don't," the small local merchant had replied.

"Well, why the hell don't you get out of town then?" Kobb had asked. On another occasion a grocer who had gone to protest a fine imposed upon him for violation of a sanitary law he said was not in the books, was met with: "So what? I make the laws around here."

Kobb nodded briefly to Jeff and looked inquiringly toward Martin Rossi.

"This is Mr. Gorman, Mayor Kobb," Rossi said. It was obvious he made the introduction reluctantly and that he wasn't pleased at all to see Kobb.

"Glad to know you," Kobb said. Although considerable distance separated the two cars and he made no visible effort to raise his voice, it reached them distinctly, each word short clipped and no inflection whatever in his tone. Jeff felt that Kobb would have said "Make mine a ham sandwich" in just the same, impersonal tone.

"How do you do?" Jeff replied, briefly, sinking back against the cushion again and addressing Rossi in a soft tone. "What's the matter, Martin—you don't look too happy to see the mayor."

Rossi shrugged his shoulders irritably and scanned the sky again. "I'm not particularly anxious for him to see me meet young Gordon Crane," he replied. "I wish you had mentioned before that you saw him last night—I didn't know he was here."

"Why don't you want him to see you meet Crane?" Jeff demanded.

"I haven't any particular reason," Rossi said. "However, Crane was anxious to avoid—that is, he said he wanted to meet me privately. That's why he suggested Palm Springs."

"Nice public place for a private meeting," Jeff remarked, dryly. "Why didn't you just meet him in the lobby of the Palace Hotel in San Francisco?"

"Not so loud," Rossi said nervously, glancing toward Kobb's car. The mayor was staring at them thoughtfully. "Crane intends to fly back to Santa Paula before dark—we're going to talk right here at the airport."

"I'm pleasantly surprised, Martin," Jeff chuckled. "I didn't realize you were capable of these continental conspiracies—rendezvous in the desert and so on. What do you think your friend Mayor Kobb is doing out here?"

"He's no friend of mine," Rossi snapped. "And I haven't the faintest idea what he's doing out here. He must be waiting for someone. He never flies. I'll tell you quite frankly, I don't enjoy this sort of thing, Cash."

Jeff tilted his hat lazily down over his eyes and studied Mayor Kobb's profile from beneath the brim of his hat. He didn't like the mayor's profile any better than he did Kobb himself. "The county had to issue bonds to float this dam, didn't it?" he inquired.

Rossi nodded.

"Don't you have any of the bonds?" Jeff asked.

"If you mean the bank, yes," Rossi replied. "Practically every bank in the State has some of them."

"How is the price holding up?"

"Firm," Rossi said, shortly. "The Valle Grande Power & Irrigation Corp. is a good, safe investment."

Jeff pushed his hat back. "Corporation? You didn't say anything about a corporation— Who runs it?"

"A commission appointed for life by the County Board of Supervisors. In reality, it's a separate division of the county government. There will be a charge for water and power which makes the project self-liquidating. You're familiar with that type of public financing, aren't you?"

Jeff nodded. "I don't suppose the mayor is a commissioner or a member of the County Board of Supervisors?"

Rossi smiled slightly. "No, he isn't. The only public office he holds is that of mayor."

Jeff was surprised. "Cagy," he said. "Who are the commissioners?"

"Businessmen," Rossi replied.

"That's something you don't have to worry about. They are all reputable executives, *experienced* at this sort of thing. They had to be to satisfy the banks, ourselves included. The chairman of the executive committee is G. Horace Maele, publisher of the Santa Paula *Sentinel*. When the county supervisors authorized the formation of the power and irrigation corporation, Kobb's influence over the dam itself ceased. As a matter of fact, the bank practically selected the commissioners."

"I don't suppose Mayor Kobb bought a few parcels of property before the county decided to authorize this?" Jeff asked.

Rossi laughed. "Well, I think the boys did all right in that respect, but you have to expect that."

Jeff shoved his hat back and regarded Rossi thoughtfully for a moment. "Just for fun, let's say Crane really knows something is going on that shouldn't be going on. Or possibly thinks he does. What do *you* want *me* to do?"

Rossi replied instantly: "Investigate privately. Check his story regardless of what personal credence we place in it. If the situation is really critical, possibly you could turn up something additional that would be helpful in reaching a solution." He paused a moment. "I haven't yet spoken with our president about confiding in you or retaining your services, but our Valle Grande investments are my responsibility and if the gravity of Crane's revelations warrant, I can assure you of a fee of five thousand dollars."

Out of the corner of his eye, Jeff noted that Jimmy Ranger was eying him with amusement, awaiting a counter offer of a different nature. Unless he was flat broke, Cash never took on jobs, as such. He didn't like to work for people.

"Five thousand?" Jeff said unexpectedly. "O. K.—five thousand. And expenses."

JEFF wasn't sure himself why he consented. He didn't need the money at the moment. As a matter of fact, he had never been better off, but he knew Rossi wanted him in the picture. And badly. He liked Rossi and he wanted to help him. But there was more to it than that; something deeper which intrigued him. He had a strange feeling that Rossi was afraid of something, not as a bank official, but personally.

Jeff tilted his hat down over his eyes again, but he watched Rossi from beneath the brim. "By the way—who's going to pay this fee—you or the bank?"

A bland, unreadable expression dropped over Rossi's face. "That's a silly question, Cash. Who do you think's going to pay it?"

"That's no—" Jeff began, but Mayor Kobb's voice cut across their conversation, calling: "Mr. Gorman."

Jeff leaned forward and looked across his companions at Kobb, who was leaning out the window of his limousine.

"Yes?" he said.

"Are you by any chance Cash Gorman?" Kobb asked.

Jeff nodded. "That's a nickname—yes."

Kobb smiled with mechanical cordiality. "Heard about you—there's no oil around Santa Paula, but a man who likes to speculate ought to be able to get action in our valley—land's booming. City is, too. Great country. You ought to come up and pay us a visit."

"Thanks. I've been thinking of doing that as a matter of fact."

"Good," Kobb said, heartily. "Drop in to see me—don't call. Come right up to city hall any time between one and three."

Rossi cleared his throat irritably as Jeff dropped back in his seat again. "I wish Kobb hadn't seen us together. I have a good mind to go on back to the hotel and wait for Crane there. He stressed privacy—that is, he doesn't want anyone from Santa Paula around."

"Suit yourself," Jeff said. "By the way—didn't you say Crane was in the insurance business?"

Rossi nodded.

"That where you met him?"

"No—no," Rossi said absently. "His father was one of my best friends, Gordon Crane, Sr. Before his death, he was the publisher of the Santa Paula *Sentinel*. I've known young Gordon for years— Cash, I think we'd better get back to the hotel. He'll look for us—"

Faint and far off there came the hum of an airplane motor.

"This must be Crane coming in now," Jeff said. A distant speck materialized in the sky northeast of the airport. "What did he do—charter a ship?"

"No, he owns a sports model," Rossi said. "Flies it himself."

Jimmy Ranger watched the approaching plane. "This is a sports model coming now," he remarked, adding: "He must be fairly prosperous."

"Not particularly," the banker remarked. "He makes a comfortable living and his sister, Millicent, has a small income from a trust fund left her by her mother so he doesn't have to worry about her. Flying is a hobby or a sport, whatever you want to call it—like fishing or stamp collecting. I guess it takes most of his money. He's only six years out of college. Nice boy."

"Do we stay?" Jeff asked.

"I guess we might as well," Rossi said, uncertainly. "It would probably look odd to move off now. Possibly it's someone else, anyway—the people the mayor is waiting for."

The plane circled downward toward the airport, a graceful, yellow sports monoplane with an inclosed cabin.

Mayor Kobb's voice startled the three of them, saying: "That's Gordon Crane's ship; he's from Santa Paula. You know him, don't you, Martin?"

Kobb had approached and was standing beside their car.

"Why, yes, I do," Rossi said. "He does a little business with us occasionally and I knew his father quite well."

"You waiting for someone," Kobb asked, conversationally.

"Yes, waiting for a friend of Mr. Gorman's from Los Angeles," Rossi replied, without flickering an eyelash.

Kobb studied the incoming plane, which was circling the airport close overhead. "What's Gordon doing?" the politician asked. "You don't have to go through all that to put down a plane, do you?"

"Getting the wind, I suppose," Jimmy Ranger said. "Or looking over the airport—looks like he's never put the plane down here before."

Mayor Kobb grunted. "Looks to me like he's a little rattled," Kobb remarked as the yellow monoplane swung around the hangar, not more than three hundred feet above the field. "Gordon's a nice boy, but he drinks too much—liquor and airplanes don't go together."

Jeff noted Rossi start and saw his face redden angrily. The banker seemed on the verge of making a heated reply when Jimmy Ranger exclaimed: "My God! Look!"

There was a tortured, grinding, spitting series of barks from Crane's motor

as he banked to come down into the wind at the far end of the field. The motor revved up with terrific speed, its pitch angry and uneven. With a sudden lurch, the yellow monoplane dived downward straight at them.

"Look out!" Jeff warned. "Duck!"

Crane fought the nose of the ship up into the air a hundred feet off the ground. There was a warning siren from the field control tower. The plane started to climb, then faltered as tortured metal in the engine screamed again. The entire plane vibrated horribly. Then, with a sickening roar, the nose dropped again and the ship plummeted straight into the ground not a hundred feet away from Jeff's car. There was a rending crash of metal. A broken piece of fuselage flew past the car as Jeff, Rossi and Jimmy Ranger ducked beneath the dashboard. A small, muffled explosion followed and fire licked up around the cabin window.

Jeff leaped from the car and started toward the wreckage. The crash car, its siren sounding, already was on the way and Mayor Kobb, sprinting with amazing speed for a man his age, already was halfway to the wrecked plane. The crash crew extinguished the fire quickly and smashed away the wreckage around the shattered cabin, extracting Gordon Crane's bloody figure.

"He's dead," one of the airport men said, after a brief inspection.

"Good Lord," Mayor Kobb exclaimed, his voice shocked. "It doesn't seem possible. Why, I was talking to him just a few hours ago on the phone. He was coming down here to meet me."

Jeff and Martin Rossi exchanged startled glances.

"What happened?" the mayor demanded of one of the airport men. "I hope he hadn't been drinking—I've warned him about that so often. Isn't there anything that can be done—"

The airport official who had arrived on the run, overheard him and demanded: "You say you know him, Mayor Kobb?"

Kobb nodded. "I was out to meet him—"

"I'm the C. A. A. representative here. Please wait in my office until I get through here, if you don't mind. Bill, show Mayor Kobb to my office. Joe, clear these people off the field. Rope off this area. Hey, *you!*—what are you doin'?"

Jeff was surprised to see that the official was shouting at Jimmy Ranger, who was bent over picking up something from the ground.

"Me?" Jimmy asked innocently. "Nothing. Why?"

The C. A. A. man approached him angrily. "What did you pick up?"

Jimmy turned his hand, palm upward, exhibiting a cigarette he was holding between thumb and index finger so that it was cupped inward toward the palm of his hand. "Dropped my cigarette."

"Oh, sorry," the official said, turning back toward the plane. "We have to keep everything just the way it is until an inspector gets here—thought you picked up something."

Rossi started forward toward the body, but Jeff caught his arm. "Nothing you can do, Martin," he said, sympathetically.

"I certainly am going to speak to that inspector," the little man said hotly. "Did you hear Kobb's remark about the boy drinking—you'd think he was a drunkard. I'm not going to stand for—"

"Let it go for the moment," Jeff said quietly. He beckoned Jimmy Ranger, guiding Rossi away from the wreckage,

protesting. "What *did* you pick up, Jimmy?"

Cautiously, Jimmy opened his hand, showing a slightly flattened scarred piece of metal which apparently had once been round. It was still hot and Jimmy held it gingerly.

"Piston bearing," he said softly. "I don't think that was any accident."

Rossi's dark face paled, his eyes widening incredulously.

Jeff looked quickly around to make sure that none of the excited spectators or field men had overheard what had been said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Emery dust," Ranger said. He wet his thumb and ran it over the bearing, an intent expression on his face, then nodded. "That stuff doesn't get in a motor accidentally."

"Are you sure?" Rossi demanded.

"Give that bearing to me," Jeff said.

A doubtful expression stole over Jimmy's broad face. "We should turn it over to the C. A. A. man," he said.

"Don't worry," Jeff said. "They know the right time—they won't have any trouble figuring it out for themselves." He turned to Rossi, whose face still showed shocked disbelief. "Martin, do you thing Crane expected Mayor Kobb to be here? Do you think he asked him to be here—possibly intended Kobb as a third party to this meeting?"

Rossi shook his head violently.

"No—that's impossible," Rossi said, blurting the words out. He hated Kobb—Lou Kobb ruined his father!"

CHAPTER II.

UNKNOWN ASSAILANT.

IN the living room of the suite he and Jimmy Ranger occupied at the Palomar Hotel, Jeff doodled idly on a pad of paper, drawing airplane propellers in peculiar shapes and watching Martin Rossi out of the corner of his eye. The little banker was pacing nervously up and down the room, taking off his spectacles and putting them on again with every other revolution of the room and occasionally stopping to stare out a window at the moon-flooded desert landscape.

Jimmy Ranger's voice came to them from the bedroom, snatches of technical phrases regarding aëronautics reaching them from time to time.

"What's he doing?" Rossi demanded irritably.

"Buying an airplane," Jeff remarked. "That is, he's talking to the main office of the Sandusky Sportsplane people in the east about their airplane. They think he wants to buy one—"

Rossi wet his lips. "Crane's plane was a Sandusky Sportsplane, wasn't it?"

Jeff nodded. "For heaven's sake, Martin, order a bottle of brandy and have a snort—you're getting me nervous galloping up and down the room that way. What's the matter with you?"

Rossi shook his head. "Haven't you any human feelings, Jeff—this boy was the son of one of my best friends. I've known him for years; almost all his life. Naturally I'm upset. He replaced his spectacles on his nose and stared intently at Jeff: "Do you think it was . . . murder?"

Jeff shrugged. "All I have to go on is what Jimmy says."

"What is emery dust," Rossi demanded.

Jeff waved his hands palms upward. "All I know is they use it for grinding lenses." Ranger re-entered the room and Jeff put the question to him.

"A powdered and particularly hard

variety of corundum—which is a very tough metal," Jimmy replied. "Well, I threw those Sandusky Sportsplane people into a tailspin. Told 'em I'd been thinking of buying one of their planes until I saw Gordon Crane crack-up today. They're going to rout their Los Angeles man out of his happy home and get him up here to take a look—his name is Halloran and he'll probably fly out tonight. They pride themselves on their planes being foolproof, you know, and I figured that if I couldn't get a look at that motor, their man could."

"Halloran going to contact you?" Jeff asked.

Ranger nodded. "Certainly. He thinks I'm a prospect."

Jeff chuckled. "Nice work. Let me see that piston bearing again."

"There's a law against walking away from the scene of an airplane accident with government evidence, and you have frequently told me never to violate the letter of the law; so I put the bearing back where I found it," Jimmy told him calmly. "I'll tell you where it is in case you'd like to go out and look for it."

Jeff dropped the subject.

"Are you convinced this is murder?" Rossi asked.

Jimmy shrugged. "I didn't have much to go on and I may have been a little hasty, but I still think it was no accident. Were you able to locate Crane's sister, Mr. Rossi?"

The banker shook his head. "No—Mayor Kobb had already told her about the . . . the accident. I guess he phoned from the airport. Anyway, she's coming here. On her way now. She'll be coming here to the Palomar, they told me at her home—I left word for her downstairs." He hesitated. "If Jimmy is right, there will be an investigation, of course?"

"Of course," Jeff said, watching Rossi intently. "At the point of departure, I presume. If anyone tinkered with the plane, they did it at Santa Paula. But why should anyone be anxious to kill Gordon Crane?"

"I don't know, Cash," Rossi replied. He took his spectacles off again and tapped them nervously on the palm of his hand, then added slowly, "There's one thing I didn't tell you—" Rossi stared past the two men, organizing his thoughts. "I told you, of course, that Gordon Crane, Sr., the boy's father, was the publisher of the *Sentinel,* didn't I?"

"Well, you mentioned it," Jeff said, "but you didn't place any particular importance on it. What about it?" Suddenly, he snapped his fingers and sat up alert in the chair in which he had been slouching comfortably. "At the airport, you said Mayor Kobb ruined his father—"

Rossi looked a bit startled. "I did? I guess I was excited. The mayor didn't precisely ruin Mr. Crane, but he could have saved him and didn't."

"Why?"

"Crane had no use for him. He constantly attacked Kobb in the *Sentinel.* As a result, Kobb used his political influence to withhold State, county and municipal advertising from the *Sentinel,* placing it all in the *Ledger.* And the *Ledger* got all the public printing business, too. When old Mr. Crane died, the paper was floating in red ink and the creditors forced its sale. Gordon was just out of college and Millicent was still a child."

"What was it Gordon told you?"

Rossi hesitated a long time, finally saying: "Of course, you have to realize that Gordon had a strong attachment for the *Sentinel.* His father founded the paper and, naturally, he was very

proud of the old war horse. And Goddon always took it for granted that he was going to carry on at the paper. Anyway, he said he would make this information he had available to us—that is, the bank—providing that we would, if and when we realized the value and urgency of his information, agree to finance him so that he would be able to repurchase the *Sentinel.*" As an afterthought, Rossi added hurriedly: "Of course, we would receive a mortgage on the property of the *Sentinel* in such an event."

Jimmy whistled softly and Jeff looked at Rossi quizzically, saying: "It looks like Crane was trying to put the shake on the bank."

"What do you mean?" Rossi demanded.

"At times, Martin, you seem remarkably naive for a successful banker," Jeff commented, somewhat dryly. "Didn't it ever occur to you that if Crane knew what he was talking about, he might have inside information?"

Rossi overlooked Jeff's rudeness, making a weary negative gesture with his head. "I won't believe that of Gordon. Anyway, he told me that control of a newspaper in Santa Paula was essential to the solution of this affair."

"Anything else?" Jeff asked, watching Rossi intently.

"No, that's the full conversation."

Jeff dropped back in his chair, leisurely. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because it was none of your damn business at the time," Rossi snapped irritably. "I'm going up to my room and see if I can't get some rest. I'll get in touch with you the first thing in the morning."

Closing the door behind Rossi, Jimmy Ranger smiled slightly. "He's a little touchy about all this." Getting no answer from Jeff who was deep in thought, he added: "In my capacity as your loyal subject, your majesty, may I humbly inquire if you ever heard of a bank going overboard like this on a wild rumor?"

Kobb's face was long and mottled red. He was about fifty, tall and strong.

"Not recently," Jeff remarked. "Whatever is behind all this revolves around land values. Listen—as soon as we talk to the Crane girl, we're going to Santa Paula. See that we have some money on hand—in cash. We may go into the real-estate business."

"How much money?"

"Oh—ten thousand dollars," Jeff said.

Jimmy sighed. "Why can't we keep our feet dry and make ourselves a five-thousand-dollar investigation fee without risk."

"That's no fun," Jeff remarked, making for the door. "If you want me, I'll be up in Rossi's room—"

THERE were several things Jeff had wanted to find out from Rossi about Valle Grande real estate when the banker had taken his sudden departure and there was one very important subject which hadn't been discussed: the significance of Mayor Kobb's statement that he, too, had been at the airport to meet Gordon Crane. At the door to Rossi's room, Jeff hesitated in the act of knocking, his attention caught by an envelope which had been shoved beneath the door. Jeff frowned. Rossi apparently had not gone directly to his room.

"Well, this isn't done in the best of circles, but—" he reflected, looking swiftly up and down the corridor. Bending over, he pulled the envelope from beneath the door. Simultaneously, he heard the light switch within the room click, and the creak of the doorknob as it was turned from within and thrown open. As he straightened up, guiltily, Jeff's eyes were caught in the blinding glare of a powerful flashlight which was shining at him from a pitch-dark room.

"It's just me, Mart—ooh." His explanation was cut short by a smashing blow to the head.

Sick, lights whirling in his brain, Jeff slowly fought back to consciousness. He was lying face down on the floor. The carpet he saw was red. Footsteps quietly approached him and hazily recalling what had happened, he cautiously closed his eyes again.

A strong odor of tobacco assailed his nostrils and a firm hand grasped him by the shoulder and turned him over. The blinking light, he could tell, was shining in his face again.

The footsteps retreated again and Jeff cautiously opened his eyes. All he could see was the beam of the flashlight and a shadowy figure behind it. The light shone over Rossi's brief case, the contents of which were being hurriedly removed by a gloved hand. Jeff heard a sudden grunt of satisfaction and the searcher tugged at something in the case, then suddenly sent the torch beam back on Jeff, who closed his eyes quickly. His head throbbed, there was no pit to his stomach and his assailant, whoever he was, might be armed. Jeff lay very still. The man moved toward the door and only when it opened did Jeff again open his eyes. In the half light from the hall, he saw only the man's back. In his left hand, the man carried a square fold of paper. He didn't look back and as the door closed behind him, Jeff struggled to his feet and made for it, but he was overcome with dizziness and fell heavily against a table, which crashed to the floor. Putting his hand to his head, he felt blood oozing just over his temple. After a moment, he got hold of himself and found the light switch.

The room was in ruins, clothes and paper carelessly strewn all over it, and Jeff himself was a mess, his face, hair and shirt clotted with blood. On the floor where he had been lying was the envelope which he had seen under the door. It had been torn open and beside it was a piece of hotel stationery. Jeff picked it up. There was no doubt this was the note. On it was scrawled one line in a bold signature: "Must see you immediately. Important. K."

Jeff stared. "K" must be Kobb. The handwriting fitted the man.

Wetting a towel, Jeff mopped off his face and the cut on his head. Then he wiped up the blood splashes on the floor and threw the towel out the win-

dow. Fortunately, when he left the room, there was no one in the corridor and only the operator in the elevator which stopped for him.

"Gosh, what happened, Mr. Gorman?" the operator asked, wide-eyed. "You're bleedin' like a stuck pig."

"Her husband dropped in on us," Jeff said, ruefully.

The operator grinned broadly. "Boy, oh boy—I guess love don't pay."

"It pays you," Jeff said, giving him a ten-dollar bill. "I'm leaving tomorrow—keep your lip buttoned until I go, will you?"

"Absolutely," the boy said. "I've forgotten it for good, Cash—any time you want anything done quietlike, my name's Mike Cassidy."

In the act of leaving the elevator, Jeff paused. "O. K., Mike—maybe you can do something for me now. Have you picked anyone up from the seventh floor in the last five minutes? A man?"

The operator shook his head. "Picked up Miss Sear—the writer."

"No." Jeff looked at his watch. "That would be between 8:30 and 8:35—ask around, will you? And you might find out from the desk if any stranger inquired about Mr. Rossi's room number."

Jimmy was absent from their rooms and Jeff, after changing his clothes, dropped in to a doctor's office to have his head patched up. Two stitches were required.

"Ran into a door, I suppose," the doctor said.

Jeff grinned. "Don't use any more bandage than you have to. I'm not anxious to advertise this."

"A bit of tape and a hunk of gauze," the physician said.

Upon his return, he waited for Mike Cassidy's elevator. "Any news?"

"Joe picked up Mayor Kobb, but he has a room on that floor—you know him, don't you?"

Jeff nodded. "By himself?"

"No, he had that cop with him—the bodyguard," Cassidy said. "I guess that guy goes to bed with him. And Joe picked up a fellow he didn't know—never seen before. But he couldn't remember what he looked like. Nobody asked for Mr. Rossi at the desk."

Jeff rewarded his intelligence department and returned to his suite, calling Rossi's room every ten minutes. Finally, it occurred to him to ask the operator if there had been any other calls for Rossi except his own.

"Just one, Mr. Gorman," she told him. "Long distance."

Jeff sent her down five dollars in an envelope and she promptly called him back. "Thank you, Mr. Gorman," she said. "Did you want to know something about that call?"

"You read my mind," he laughed.

"I just checked with long distance. It was station-to-station from Alameda. I spoke with the man. He didn't leave his name, but he asked what room number Mr. Rossi had. That was at 6:54.

"Did you tell him Mr. Rossi's room number?"

"Yes, sir. Hold the line a minute—there was another call for him, a local call, about 7:45. I didn't handle that one, but Grace did. She forgot it before because the man just asked for the room number."

"Thank you," Jeff said.

He was still trying to put the pieces together an hour later when Jimmy Ranger burst into the room.

"I was right," he yelled excitedly. "I was just talking to Halloran—the guy from the L. A. office of the Sandusky Sportsplane Co. He was out looking

at the wreck—says there was enough emery dust in there to choke a bomber. It was carried in the gasoline."

"Well, that makes it a slight case of murder," Jeff said. "Or does it?"

"Sure it does," Jimmy affirmed. "The C. A. A. has an inspector up here from Los Angeles already. They told Halloran not to say anything just yet, but he was hot to sell me a plane and naturally wanted to defend dear old Sandusky's honor, so he spilt the beans—she blew two cylinder heads—"

"Anything else?" Jeff asked.

"That's enough, isn't it," Jimmy demanded, then he apparently thought of something else and began to turn slightly red. "That fellow Halloran was a pretty good salesman—"

Jeff glared at him. "Did you buy one of those planes?"

"What have you got against 'em?" Jimmy asked sheepishly. "They're good planes. And the guy said if I didn't buy one now it might be a long time before I could get one. They may not be able to get motors for 'em for quite a while on account of the defense orders."

"Whose money did you pay for it with?" Jeff demanded.

"Well, I used my power-of-attorney," Jimmy replied. "If you don't want a plane—O. K. You can take it out of my pay. But, listen, if you ever want to use that plane I'll charge you regular charter rates."

"Who's going to fly it?" Jeff asked.

"I am—the lessons come with it; for free."

"I'll take it out of your pay," Jeff assured him.

"When you see how I handle her, you'll be crazy to go up."

"Precisely my thought," Jeff said. "Have you seen Rossi?"

"No. I've been down in the bar with Halloran ever since you left," Jimmy replied. "Isn't he in his room—what happened to your head?"

"A boil," Jeff replied. "I had to have it opened."

"You didn't have a boil." Jimmy's wide blue eyes opened even wider. "Did I miss something?"

"Yes, but I still had a boil if anybody asks you," Jeff said, relating what had happened to him.

"I wonder what the guy took?" Jimmy said. "Where is Rossi, anyway?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Jeff said. "You might make inquiries downstairs—discreetly, of course. But if you see him don't mention my having been in his room or say anything about that note from Kobb."

"Don't keep me on pins and needles, maestro," Jimmy said.

Jeff laughed. "I'm just curious to see what he says."

Ranger shook a doubtful head. "Maybe we ought to drop out of this game. I catch a strong scent of larceny."

"Me, too," Jeff replied. "In the public interest, if for no other reason, we should go up and have a look at the Valle Grande."

"That's a nice, pious way of putting it, but we might get cleaned ourselves." There was a knock on the door. "That must be Rossi, now," Jimmy added, moving toward the door.

When he swung it open they were surprised to see not only Rossi, but, beside him, an impertinent, smallish, blue-eyed, red-headed girl. Jeff decided that you didn't see her. She overwhelmed you with one look. She didn't walk, she actually charged into the room, commanding the action to center around her. The only redeeming noteworthy thing, Cash reflected, was that her mouth

was drooped. It was tender and looked as if her lips might quiver if she let them go. He was on his feet instantly. He knew it was Gordon Crane's sister. He leaped across the room in a stride.

"Miss Crane," he said, taking both her hands in his. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I know," she said.

"This is Mr. Ranger," said Jeff, "my associate."

Millicent Crane nodded to Jimmy as Martin Rossi pulled up a chair in front of the davenport.

"Naturally, Millicent," said Rossi, "I knew you'd be anxious, but I didn't think you'd fly down."

"Why not?" she snapped. "Gordon would have done it."

Here, Cash decided, was a lot of woman. Brattish and spoiled, but definitely a personality and not one to faint and swoon and go into hysterics in the face of disaster. She wasn't hard, she was formidable.

"You will want to know how it happened," Cash said. He wasn't asking permission and he waited for no reply. She glanced at him with understanding. "We don't know the details as yet, but your brother was landing his plane. I don't think he was familiar with the field—" She affirmed this with a nod and Jeff continued: "He circled several times, rather low—got the wind and then banked around again and flew toward the far end of the runway at about three hundred feet. Then he gave it the gun and banked back toward us. The engine roared, sputtered and the plane dove into the ground. Practically in front of us. He was dead when he was pulled out."

As he concluded, Cash handed her a pony of brandy which Jimmy had poured. She gulped it in with a swallow.

"Thanks, Mr. Gorman," she said. She closed her eyes. None of them said anything. When she opened her eyes again, two huge tears coursed down her nose. She was unmindful of them. Her voice was almost tremulous as she spoke: "He was so hopeful when he came down to meet Mr. Rossi."

Cash offered her a cigarette box. She took one and lighted it. Jimmy poured her another brandy. Rossi took it and Jeff noted that he looked more wan than the girl. She let the tears run, but she had hold of herself. Rossi hunched his chair toward her, but Jeff waived him to silence.

"Did Mr. Rossi explain my position here?" Jeff asked.

Millicent Crane wiped away the tears and looked at him in some surprise. Apparently she hadn't been giving any thought to Jeff or his position.

"Why, yes," she said, somewhat vaguely. "He said you were a friend of his and you came down here to talk with Gordon about regaining the *Sentinel*—"

"Mr. Gorman is interested in Valle Grande real estate," Rossi put in, hurriedly. "That's the principal reason why he was anxious to meet Gordon and hear what he had to say."

"Real estate?" Millicent Crane asked, puzzled.

"Well, my interest to date is purely academic," Jeff said, "but I am interested now—seriously."

"But what had real estate to do with Gordon's trip?" she asked. "He wanted to get the *Sentinel* back."

Her sincerity was unmistakable and Jeff reached the conclusion that Gordon Crane hadn't confided in his sister; not directly at least. Jeff looked at Rossi. "Do I have your permission to speak frankly with Miss Crane?"

Rossi shook his head violently. "I don't see any cause to alarm her unduly

until, ah, we have more to go on—"

"We have," Jeff said flatly.

What color there was in Rossi's face drained slowly out of it. Wanly, he waved his hand for Jeff to go on.

Millicent Crane looked from one to the other in bewilderment. "What is it?" she cried. "What are you talking about?"

"Your brother's trip here; that is, his purpose in coming was primarily to regain the *Sentinel*, Miss Crane," Jeff said slowly. "However, there was more involved than just that. Exactly what, we aren't sure." He paused, finding himself slightly at a loss for words. Dragging it out wouldn't soften the blow any, he decided, adding quickly: "Your brother's death was no accident. He was murdered."

Millicent's eyes fixed themselves on Jeff's face in a blank, uncomprehending stare. Jeff groped for something further to say and Rossi put his arm around the girl's shoulder, patting her gently.

"Murder!" She screamed the word. "Oh, no! No! Brad said it was perfectly safe—"

Jeff leaned forward eagerly: "What was perfectly safe?"

"This trip—the story," she sobbed.

"What story?" Jeff snapped.

Her brief moment of hysteria suddenly passed. A sudden, suspicious expression crossed her face.

"Who *are* you, anyway?" she demanded. "What right have you to question me this way?" A look of comprehension flooded her features. "Oh! You're the San Francisco editor, aren't you?"

Bewildered, Jeff asked: "What editor?"

The telephone rang.

"For Miss Crane," Jimmy said.

"I'll take it," Jeff said, reaching the phone in one stride. Millicent Crane leaped after him saying: "Oh, no, you won't—"

Martin Rossi caught her arm, pleading: "Please, Millicent, Jeff is a friend."

Over the wire, a man's voice asked Jeff: "Is Miss Crane there?"

"Who is calling?"

"This is Mr. Rankin, Civil Aëronautics Authority representative here."

"This is Mr. Gorman speaking," Jeff told him. "Unless it is urgent, I would prefer not to disturb Miss Crane. Is there anything I can do?"

There was a slight pause on the other end of the wire and Jeff heard muffled voices. "What is your name in full, Mr. Gorman?"

Jeff told him.

"Are you a friend of the family?" Rankin asked.

"No, but I am a friend of Mr. Martin Rossi of San Francisco. These are my rooms."

"We are holding some personal effects of Mr. Crane's here," the C. A. A. man said. "Would you call that to the attention of Miss Crane or some member of the family?"

"Can I pick them up?" Jeff asked. "Miss Crane is the only member of the family here and she's a bit upset, of course."

"No, I'm sorry, but it will have to be a member of the family," Jeff was told. "Mr. Rossi and Mayor Kobb, whom I presume you know, both offered to take care of it for Miss Crane, but we had to refuse them, too," Rankin said.

That explained where Rossi had been.

"Is there anything important—anything Miss Crane should know about, do you think—or can it wait until later; possibly tomorrow morning."

"I don't think there's anything im-

portant," Rankin said. "A wallet and a few letters which were in his pocket. A couple of bills; identification and about forty dollars; check book. It can wait until morning, if she would prefer."

Jeff lowered his voice: "About the body—"

"Mayor Kobb made a formal identification—he was waiting here to meet Crane—and so did Mr. Rossi, later, while he was waiting for Miss Crane to arrive," Rankin said. "The coroner has gone through the customary formalities and Mayor Kobb obtained release. Won't be necessary for her to look at it; pretty messy."

"We can send for an ambulance then—"

"There's an undertaker's man from Los Angeles on the way here now—Mayor Kobb took care of that, too."

"Very considerate of the mayor," Jeff commented dryly.

"Yeah, he took it pretty hard, too," Rankin said, adding casually: "By the way, was Mr. Rossi waiting here to see Mr. Crane?"

Jeff cut the connection. Motioning to Jimmy Ranger to attend Millicent, who was sobbing quietly on Rossi's shoulder, Jeff said: "Martin, come here a minute." He lifted the hook and said: "Operator, locate a Mr. Rankin for me at the airport."

Rossi approached, asking nervously: "Are you sure it was murder, Cash?"

"Yes," Jeff snapped. "Quick—did you tell those fellows out at the airport you were waiting for Crane here."

"No, I didn't," Rossi said, wetting his lips. "After what the mayor said, I thought . . . I said we were waiting for a friend of yours who didn't show up."

"That's just dandy. Go out in the hall for two minutes," Jeff said, answering the telephone again. "Hello, Rankin? We were cut off. What was it you were saying?"

Rankin's voice was not quite as friendly and disinterested as it had been. "I asked if Mr. Rossi was expecting Mr. Crane today?"

"Why, I really can't speak for Mr. Rossi," Jeff said.

"Well, let me speak to him, please," Rankin asked.

"I'm sorry, but he's not here just now," Jeff said.

There was a pregnant silence on the wire. "Were you at the airport today at the time of the crash, Mr. Gorman?"

"Yes, I was," Jeff replied, noting that Rankin had avoided the use of the word accident.

"With Mr. Rossi, I believe," the C. A. A. inspector continued.

"That's correct," Jeff answered. "With Mr. Rossi and my assistant, Mr. James Ranger."

"Were *you* waiting to meet Mr. Crane?"

The conversation was not developing very well. Jeff was determined not to make any false statements that might later catch up with him with possibly embarrassing results and at the same time he was anxious to remain as much a spectator as possible. It was always nicer to be a spectator at a murder.

"May I ask the reason for this line of interrogation?" Jeff replied.

"Skip it," Rankin replied shortly. "However, before you leave Palm Springs, Mr. Gorman, leave your destination and also your permanent address with our representative here. That request is official. It also applies to your assistant."

"Certainly. Anything else?"

"I would like to speak to Mr. Rossi as soon as possible. Please tell him."

JEFF hung up the telephone and stared thoughtfully at it, as if it might hold a few answers. Apparently the C. A. A. people had no intention of immediately announcing the cause of the accident or even making it known to Crane's family. Puzzled, Jeff finally decided that they wanted to be certain of their ground before they made any official moves. Then, too, Federal authorities generally liked silence and as few newsmen as possible around while they were conducting an investigation. Also, there was the matter of jurisdiction. The death had occurred in Palm Springs, officially, but the plane had been tampered with prior to its take-off, which was Santa Paula, in Valle Grande County. "Oh-oh" Jeff said softly to himself, congratulating himself upon his avoidance of any misstatements. The instrument of death, if it was decided to have been murder, was an airplane. All matters concerning aëronautics being Federally administered, the C. A. A. would refer criminal investigation of an airplane death to the F. B. I.

"A nice little mess," Jeff thought. He looked around. Jimmy was lending Millicent Crane a sympathetic shoulder and Rossi was apparently still standing out in the hall.

"Explain the cause of the accident to Miss Crane, will you, Jimmy?" Jeff asked, moving toward the door. He closed it behind him and was surprised to find Rossi talking to a man whose back was to him. The man turned as he heard the door close. It was Mayor Kobb.

"Hello, Gorman," Kobb said casually, his cold blue eyes studying Jeff's face with the calculating intentness of a man watching an opponent at stud poker. "Rossi just told me you were speaking with the C. A. A. inspector. Any news of the cause of the accident?"

Jeff made a wry face. "I forgot to ask. Stupid of me."

"Terrible thing," Kobb said. He didn't sound particularly distressed, Jeff thought. "By the way, there are some personal effects of young Crane's at the airport. They said she'd have to pick them up herself."

Jeff nodded. "So Inspector Rankin just told me." He deliberately failed to amplify his remarks.

"A few personal effects, I suppose?" Mayor Kobb said. It was put as only half a question, but Jeff sensed that he was hopeful of a more complete answer and contented himself with nodding his head. Apparently, when Gordon Crane took off from Santa Paula he had something in his possession that both Rossi and Mayor Kobb wanted very badly. And possibly a third party, he reflected, thinking painfully of the intruder in Rossi's room. It must definitely be a third party. Because Mayor Kobb must have known that Rossi had been no more successful than he himself in his attempts to obtain Crane's effects, ostensibly to give them to Millicent Crane. Jeff watched Kobb's face closely, but if the mayor was disappointed at eliciting no further information, his horselike countenance didn't show it.

"Miss Crane starting back tonight?" Kobb asked, addressing Rossi.

"Why—ah, I really don't know," Rossi said. "We haven't discussed it—"

Kobb moved toward the door. "Must pay my respects," he said.

Startled, Rossi said: "Of course, Mayor Kobb, we all appreciate what you've done very much, but Millicent is quite upset and—"

Jeff opened the door. "Come right in, mayor."

Kobb gave him a sidelong look out of

his eyes as he passed into the room and Jeff had a startling impression that the Santa Paula executive had come close to laughing. As Jeff followed him, he had no doubt but that Kobb realized that Jeff's invitation had been prompted by a desire to see what happened. What did happen, startled them both.

Millicent Crane, at the sight of Kobb, turned deathly pale, making her eyes seem abnormally large. Fires of fury lit them. Her fists clenched. She jumped to her feet.

"You beast," she screamed. "You killed Gordon! You *killed* him." Her voice rose until it cracked shrilly. "You ruined dad and now you've killed him."

Her fingers set like claws, she flew at Kobb. Jimmy Ranger caught her and held her, struggling, by the arms or she would have scratched his face to ribbons. Kobb flushed and his mouth set in a mean, cruel line. "You're crazy," he said out of the corner of his lips, hardly moving them. His voice was flat. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about; don't deny it," she cried. Rossi moved over to her quickly and began fussing around her, patting her cheek and saying: "Now, now, my dear—you're upset. You don't know what you're saying. Mayor Kobb has been very kind. He arranged—"

"I don't care what he arranged," she screamed. "He was arranging an alibi —that's what he was doing. He's always hated us. He hated daddy, because daddy knew he was rotten and said so in the *Sentinel* and he hated Gordon because he knew Gordon was wise to his dirty, crooked, conniving tricks—"

Leaning forward, Kobb lifted his hand and slapped her viciously across the mouth, saying: "Shut up, you little slut. Your brother was a cheap, blackmailing chiseler and if somebody gave it to him, he deserved it."

There was a startled silence, broken by a sob from Millicent. Blood showed across her mouth. Without moving his feet, Jeff automatically brought up his fist and knocked Kobb sprawling with a hard left to the man's unprotected jaw.

"Get out of here," he said, all the disgust he felt welling up in his voice.

Kobb climbed painfully to his feet, his face swollen with rage. "Don't you ever come to Santa Paula, Gorman," he said, his voice so low Jeff could hardly hear it. "You're nothing but a fancy swindler and we don't like 'em. We've got a treatment for guys like you."

"Get out," Jeff said, quietly.

Jimmy Ranger very gently pushed Millicent into Martin Rossi's arms. Taking two quick steps, he reached Kobb's side. Savagely the big politician struck at Ranger with all his weight behind the blow, but Jimmy turned half sidewise and caught Kobb's fist on a shoulder experienced in dealing with football tackles. Even though his jaw was protected, the blow staggered him but he recovered and smashed his own heavy fist into Kobb's face. Catching the mayor as he fell, he opened the door and threw the man into the hall.

"Right in the eye," he said, locking the door. "He'll have a little souvenir to take back to Santa Paula with him, the son of a—"

CHAPTER III.

ROSSI HOLDS BACK.

JEFF wanted coherent information out of Millicent Crane and at the moment that was out of the question. The girl was much too overwrought. Action, he decided, would be an excellent

antidote so, without difficulty, he persuaded her that it would be best to return that night to Santa Paula.

"You drive Millicent to the airport, Prince Charming," Jeff told Jimmy Ranger. Jeff then telephoned and found that a plane could be chartered to take them to Santa Paula that night. "And get Rossi and myself a cab. Also, take care of the bill and be sure not to get out to the field before we do. Incidentally, explain to Miss Crane that we are not supposed to know that her brother's accident wasn't accidental unless the C. A. A. people bring the matter up. Comfort the poor, Jimmy."

"O. K," Jimmy responded, enthusiastically. "Say, what do I do with the car when we leave?"

"You're not leaving with us," Jeff told him. "You are going to chaperone the late Gordon Crane to Los Angeles, see that he is put on a train for Santa Paula with someone to go along with the body."

Jimmy sighed profoundly. "You can think of the nicest things for me to do. Can't the undertaker attend to all that?"

"I suppose he could, Jimmy," Jeff grinned. "However, I think Millicent would appreciate the personal touch. Anyway, I have something for you to do—stop off at the airfield at Alameda and find out if a private plane or a chartered plane flew in there today, some time between 5:30 and 6 o'clock, from Santa Paula or any place in the immediate vicinity of an airport. If so, get the gentleman's name. And if possible find out if he made a telephone call to Palm Springs."

Jimmy frowned. "Oh! The guy that slugged you?"

"Might be," Jeff responded. "Now look . . . I'm going to need you in a hurry. Put the car on a train at Los Angeles when you get there . . . if you miss the last train hire a taxi driver; Bill Slinger would be great if he's at the stand by the hotel; he never drives less than ninety—"

"And—"

"Get some sleep so you'll be all bright and chipper and plan to drive yourself into the Valle Grande in the morning through Tres Ojos Pass. You can get your breakfast there. Then drive up the valley—you're a small, well-to-do fruit grower from the Imperial Valley and you're looking over property with an eye to buying. Stop off both at real-estate offices in the town and at farms already cultivated. Find out what's playing; price, outlook. Get it?"

"I get it," Jimmy said. "What'll I do if they show me a vegetable?"

Jeff laughed. "Try to look intelligent. And for Heaven's sake, don't buy a farm!"

In the hired car with Rossi, Jeff rolled up the glass partition separating them from the driver and lit the banker's cigar for him, taking advantage of the moment to study Rossi's haggard face. His middle-aged friend, whose features were usually bland and frequently cheerful, was rapidly becoming an old man.

"Martin," Jeff said, still holding the light so that it illuminated Rossi's face. "Where the hell were you all evening?"

A wary expression showed in Rossi's face, despite his efforts to appear unconcerned. "Well, as you know, I dropped out to the air field. I started to go to my room, but I felt restless and I had a premonition Millicent might fly in—little spitfire, isn't she?"

Jeff dropped the match out the window of the car. "What are you trying to hide, Martin?"

He could feel Rossi start.

"Nothing, Cash," Rossi said, attempt-

ing to inject an irritable note in his voice. "Great heavens, man; don't you trust anybody?"

"There are times when I don't even trust myself," Jeff replied dryly. "You weren't at the airport when Millicent Crane got here." Rossi started to protest, but Jeff cut him off. "I asked her. You went out there to claim Crane's stuff. There's something you think he has and you want it. What is it?"

Rossi was silent a minute. "Jeff, I really don't know. He said he was bringing documented proof. I was afraid Kobb might try to get hold of the stuff."

"Then it *does* concern him?" Jeff asked, triumphantly.

"I don't know that either," Rossi said, "but that man is mixed up in everything. And I'm afraid of him. He's absolutely ruthless and I know Crane hated him."

"Well, if he brought anything with him we'll soon know what it was," Jeff said. "By the way, do you want me to continue with our little deal?"

"Under the circumstances, I'm more anxious than ever to have you investigate this for us, Cash," Rossi replied. "I took it for granted you were going through with it."

"All right," Jeff replied. "But you'll have to level with me, Rossi—you know something that I don't. What is it?"

Rossi protested vehemently that he was absolutely in the dark.

"What was in the note Kobb left under your door?" Jeff demanded, harshly.

Rossi's voice was fraught with alarm as he asked: "How did you know he left me a note?"

Jeff shook his head, incredulously. Rossi was badly shaken. Ordinarily he could slip through a question as suavely as a supreme court lawyer. "Just after you left, I went up to your room to ask you a few questions I didn't have a chance to put to you before, and as I turned into the corridor where you lived, I saw Kobb slip the note under the door."

He heard Rossi expel a long breath. "He wanted to see me—tell me he had sent for an ambulance and cut the red tape as much as possible regarding the release of the body—"

"You know the girl may have something in that remark about the alibi," Jeff commented, adding innocently: "Incidentally did you have any other visitors?"

"Eh? Oh, no—none at all. As a matter of fact, I had just gotten the note and looked up Kobb when a boy located me and told me Millicent had arrived at the hotel—"

Jeff found himself at sea at Rossi's absolute silence with regard to the looting of his room. There was no doubt in his mind that Rossi wanted him in the bank's corner; or possibly in his own personal corner, but he still was withholding information. Somehow, he concluded, Rossi had gotten himself into the middle in a dangerous game. He decided to drop the subject of the room for the moment.

"By the way, regarding the Valle Grande, have there been any recent offerings of land at prices below the current market level?" Jeff said, conversationally.

"No-o-o," Rossi replied, slowly. "No. None at all, Cash. I mean on a significant scale. There have been a few lots here and there offered at a sacrifice, but they were small pieces—people who needed the money, I presume. But absolutely no trend in that direction. No reason for such a trend. We keep our

finger on the pulse down there all the time."

Jeff felt certain that this information was correct. Rossi's tone was sincere and, back on familiar ground again, he spoke with sincerity.

"I'll see that you have daily reports on that, Cash," Rossi promised. He put a light to his cigar, thoughtfully. "By the way, there is one thing that might interest you, although we haven't put any special significance on it—just searching my mind, you know. There have been three blocks of land of ten thousand acres each offered for sale in the east. However, no price concession is involved other than the usual dickering you can expect in a deal of that size."

"Who's offering it?" Jeff asked eagerly.

Rossi's answer was disappointing.

"Van Swager & Leaven in New York are handling it, but they won't reveal the principals."

"Why not?"

"Oh, you know how those things are," Rossi said. "There are any number of reasons a seller might wish to conceal his identity until necessary to make it known. I've done it myself on occasion. So have you, I dare say."

Jeff asked who was in a position to sell land in such large blocks and Rossi named ten or twelve companies and several individuals, including G. Horace Maele, the publisher of the Santa Paula *Sentinel*. "They all got in early and bought cheap, B. D.—Before the Dam. Most of them are politicians or have strong political connections, Maele excepted."

"How about Kobb?" Jeff asked.

Rossi shook his head. "The way I understand it, he made plenty; but he's entirely out of real estate now—in the valley itself, anyway. If he has any holdings, they aren't in his name. You can't find a single thing in which that man is connected." There was grudging admiration in Rossi's voice. "He makes $4,500 a year and lives on an estate that must cost him that much to keep up. The house alone cost $75,000 to build."

"A man who stretches his money," Jeff commented. "Well, here we are—if there's an answer to this it ought to be in Crane's papers. What's the matter with you, Martin? What are you looking at?"

Rossi pointed toward a heavy limousine. "That's Kobb's car," he said. "Do you think—"

Jeff grasped his arm and practically pulled Rossi from the car. "There's Jimmy with Millicent," he said, urgently. "Get hold of her and tell her for Heaven's sake not to make a scene in the office if Kobb's there. Tell her to be polite if it kills her!"

CHAPTER IV.

FLIGHT TO SANTA PAULA.

WITHIN the brightly lighted airport office were several men whom Jeff took to be C. A. A. investigators.

A smallish, shrewd-faced man arose and introduced himself. "I'm Mr. Rankin, an inspector of the Civil Aëronautics Authority of Los Angeles. You are Miss Crane, I presume."

"Yes," Millicent said in a small voice, looking at a desk on which Jeff saw a wallet, several pocket photographs and some letters, evidently, Gordon Crane's personal effects.

"I can't tell you how sorry we all are, Miss Crane," Rankin said, drawing up a chair for her. He introduced himself to the others and waved his hand to the rear of the room where, sitting in

the shadows, was Mayor Kobb, a large bandage over his right eye.

"You all know Mayor Kobb, of course," Ranking said.

"Hi-ya, mayor," said Jimmy Ranger. "Walk into a door?"

The mayor grumbled something inaudibly and then raised his voice to greet Millicent Crane quite civilly, getting to his feet. To Jeff's relief she replied in kind, thanking him for his courtesy during the day.

Prodding Jimmy with his elbow, Jeff hissed: "Keep your mouth buttoned, you ape."

"I have a few routine questions to ask you, Miss Crane," Rankin said, and to Jeff's surprise, they *were* only routine questions.

There was nothing to indicate that this was not an ordinary accident, but Jeff, watching the faces of the two men behind Rankin who took no part in the conversation, realized that they were studying every answer and all of the guests very closely. "They move slowly," he thought to himself, "and like the mills of the gods, they grind exceedingly fine."

At last they asked her to identify Gordon's belongings and surrendered them to her. Once outside the office, Jeff and Rossi made a quick examination of the items which had been in Gordon's pocket. There was nothing which conceivably could have had any bearing on the situation. "You don't think that Kobb got hold of it, do you?" Jimmy Ranger asked excitedly. "I'll go back and slug that guy—"

"Hold your horses," Jeff said. "Nobody's putting anything over on those boys. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them was an F. B. I. man."

Jeff drew Jimmy aside. Call up Ramsey in New York," he said, referring to his broker. "Tell him to get in touch with an outfit called Van Swager & Leaven. They have the blocks of real estate up for sale for parties unknown—ten thousand acres apiece. If possible, I want him to find out who the principals are. If he can't get that, he's to wire as to the locations of the property and we'll check it ourselves. You follow?"

"Van Swager & Leaven," Jimmy repeated, making a note of the name. "O. K., anything else?"

"Yes, tell him to get their asking price and offer them forty percent less; transactions to be in cash. I want him to telephone their reaction immediately."

Jimmy made a small, sad noise: "For

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all thirty thousand acres?"

Jeff looked at him intently. "No—thanks for asking. Tell him just to bid on one parcel—they might accept. And my name isn't to be mentioned."

Jimmy confirmed these instructions, adding: "Ten thousand acres!"

"We can afford to gamble, if we have to," Jeff laughed.

"That's what you said in Brazil," Ranger responded. "What's playing?"

"East Lynne."

"That's always a hit in the vegetable belt," Jimmy said, "but who is going to be the poor babe who gets thrown out in the snow?"

"Aw, shucks, Mr. Ranger, there ain't no snow in these parts," Jeff quipped.

"I knew that airplane would come in handy," Jimmy remarked as he saw Jeff back to the plane.

Jeff stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, when you get through playing peek-a-boo in the fog, we'll at least have a tangible asset. Have a nice time."

He helped Millicent Crane into the plane and impulsively kissed her hand, saying: "Keep your chin up."

Jeff blinked at Rossi. "My gosh," he murmured. "He's gone Continental on me."

Rossi chuckled. "Millicent seems to like it. He's a good boy, that Ranger."

"One of the best," Cash assented, reflecting that his Mr. Ranger must be a good man in an automobile, too. Millicent looked almost cheerful and it was with considerable reluctance that Jeff reopened his inquisition as the cabin plane he had chartered took to the air.

"Miss Crane, you mentioned a man by the name of Brad once; who is he?" he asked.

"Brad MacKenzie," she answered. "He's the city editor of the *Sentinel*. He worked for daddy, too."

Jeff stepped into the conversation again. "Did Mr. MacKenzie have a part in this plan of your brother's to regain the *Sentinel?*"

Her lips quivered at mention of her brother, but she replied evenly: "Yes, he furnished Gordon with some information. It was a big story, but they never told me what it was, and it worried me because I'm sure it had something to do with politics—"

"Mayor Kobb?" Jeff asked, eagerly.

"I think so," she replied. "I heard Gordon say once: 'We'll have to be very careful, because if Kobb finds out he'd do anything to stop us.' I begged them then to tell me what it was, but they wouldn't, and Brad said: 'Don't worry; it's perfectly safe. We've considered every eventuality.'"

Jeff frowned. "What was this about San Francisco newspapermen? You accused me of being one, remember?"

She smiled slightly. "You see, they wanted to print these stories themselves, but if they couldn't raise the money to buy the *Sentinel*, they planned to sell the stories to a San Francisco newspaper. That was Gordon's idea. He thought that if they could get hold of any good-sized sum of money, they could run it up quickly into enough to buy the *Sentinel* later."

"How?" asked Jeff.

"I don't know, but he was very confident. Once he said, 'You'll have tiaras yet, sis.'" She made a weary gesture. "Brad will tell you all about it when we get back—excuse me, but I am tired."

Jeff and Rossi spoke to each other only twice during the rest of the flight, both being wrapped in their own thoughts.

At the airport, they were met by an

active, elderly man who immediately took Millicent in sympathetic charge.

"This is Mr. Sam Filon," Rossi introduced. "Mr. Gorman, a very good friend of mine, Sam."

"And me," Millicent said. "He's been just wonderful." She looked around. "Where is Brad?"

Filon, whom Jeff later learned had been an advertising manager of the *Sentinel* when it was published by Gordon Crane, Sr., avoided her eyes, casting a wary glance at Martin Rossi.

"I don't know, my dear," he said. "He called my home and left word that he had been called out of town, unexpectedly. I don't know where he went."

CHAPTER V.

KOBB'S DOMINION.

JEFF permitted himself the luxury of a long sleep and it was Jimmy Ranger who pulled him out of bed around noon.

"How is the vegetable business?" Jeff inquired, sleepily.

Jimmy shook his head. "Nothing suspicious. Not a clue. Nobody I ran into with cultivated land was anxious to sell; just getting started and think the valley has great things ahead of it."

"Very odd," Jeff said. He thought this over for a few minutes. "It doesn't add up. How about the telephone call from Alameda?"

"A man in a chartered plane from San Francisco flew in about that time. Whether or not he made a phone call, I couldn't find out. However, I did get the pilot's name and called him. He told me the man was Roger Smith of Sacramento." Jimmy shrugged expressively. "Maybe it *was* Roger Smith of Sacramento."

"Or maybe it was Brad MacKenzie of Santa Paula," Jeff commented. "He was mysteriously absent yesterday evening." He downed a cup of coffee at a gulp.

"I think I'll just go out and look around the city," he added. "Stick by the phone. I'll probably drop in on MacKenzie, but I want to make it casual, and right now I can't think of a casual way to do it. It's hard to tell just exactly where he sits and I don't want to antagonize him."

"You won't get any inspirations from looking at Santa Paula," Jimmy commented.

Santa Paula, Jeff saw, was as Jimmy said, something less than inspiring. There were wide, asphalt paved streets, too wide, in fact. Dumpy stores lined Grande Boulevard, broken only by an occasional synthetic architectural monstrosity—an aged edifice with a false, modernistic front. Trolley cars rumbled through its streets and the only thing which Cash came upon to break the monotony was a section called Sentinel Square. This was a plaza. On one side was the Plandome Hotel, complete with green awning with white lettering and a uniformed doorman. Opposite the Plandome was the new Sentinel Building. There was the Valle Grande Bank at one end and something which looked official at the other end. The north side of the plaza swept across the railroad tracks in six-lane splendor and immediately narrowed to a conventional narrow city street across a gaudy concrete bridge.

He was starting across the square toward the newspaper office when a huge black car stopped in front of him and one of two men in it jumped out.

"Get in," he commanded, shoving Jeff toward the car. Jeff pulled his wallet from his pocket and dropped it.

"What's the idea, you cluck?" the

man demanded, reaching down for the wallet.

The man screamed painfully as Jeff's heel crushed his fingers and Jeff jumped away, yelling "Police." With amazing speed the second man leaped from the car and brought Jeff to a halt with a neck tackle, growling: "You're talking to the police, you mug."

Jeff stood stock-still. "What?"

The man threw back his lapel and revealed a gold badge, detective sergeant, and the second officer burst through the crowd that was forming, his good fist doubled up for a blow.

"Nix," the officer beside Jeff said, nodding at the crowd. Out of the corner of his mouth he said softly: "We'll work on him later. Get in the car, you!"

"A legal snatch, eh?" Jeff commented.

"No cracks, wise guy," commanded the officer with the crushed hand. "What's your name? What's your racket? What are you doing in Santa Paula?"

"Are you gentlemen really, ah, officers of the *peace?*" Jeff asked.

"Yes, we're police officers. Come on, mug, what's your name?"

"Is this by any chance occupied territory?" Jeff inquired.

"What?" snapped the second officer.

"This is the United States, isn't it?" Jeff pursued.

"Get in," the cop commanded, shoving him again, but warily.

"Just out of curiosity, where am I going and for what?"

"To police headquarters," said the surly officer, nursing his knuckles. "And have better answers than the ones you gave me!"

"It can't happen here," Jeff mumbled, but he got in. "On to the Wilhelmstrasse, my bully boys."

The car drew into an archway down the side of the building which filled the other end of Sentinel Square. This, Jeff assumed, would be the Municipal Center, and it was really flashy. The building was comparatively new and probably housed the entire government of the city and county. It could easily have accommodated half the government departments in Washington. Something resembling a small scale Holland Tunnel dipped under the side of the building and into it the prowl car turned. It drew to a halt before a conventional police station entrance, conventional even to the green lights. The two detectives led Cash through the squad room and up a wide staircase to a corridor which was separated, Jeff realized, from the main part of the building. It was lined on either side with offices. They went into a room marked "Detective Headquarters." It was a smaller scale squad room with a private office to the right and the door to this was opened. The men ushered Jeff through the door. From behind a roll-top desk placed diagonally across the room peered a pair of gimlet eyes set in a thin, narrow head. The hair was thin and plastered and the mouth a narrow slit separating the jaw. The mouth didn't open. The question was in the eyes.

"We picked this guy up in the square," said one man, the talkative one. "He don't answer questions."

The desk man's eyes shifted to Jeff. They were mean but direct. He looked at a chair next to him. The officer rose and revealed a large stomach, incongruous with his thin head.

"Are you suggesting that I be seated?" asked Jeff.

Still the man didn't answer.

"He looks like a gambler," said the

talkative one, "and we don't like gamblers; do we cap'n?"

"What's your business, young man?" asked the captain in a flat, clipped tone.

"My own," replied Jeff. "Look, captain, I presume that's what you are, I'm a citizen of the United States. I have my draft registration card with me, letters of identification from my bank, and this to suggest I'm not a vagrant."

He withdrew a handful of currency from his pocket and the captain as well as the detectives stared wide-eyed at the wad of bills as Jeff carelessly gripped them in his hand. Jeff smiled at the fascination which his gesture produced.

"Whose dough is that?" demanded one of the detectives.

"I just ran off a fresh batch," said Jeff. "I carry my own press with me. It's in my hotel suite at the Plandome."

"Look, Mr. Oakie, do you mind if we put aside the comedy," the captain asked sarcastically.

"As soon as your Keystone brethren here get smart," snapped Jeff.

The captain disregarded the remark.

"What's your name?"

"Thomas Gorman," said Jeff. "Thomas Jefferson Gorman. I'm registered at the Plandome. I think this is an outrage. I'm not used to Gestapo methods and I'm not going to submit to a police inquisition without making a lot of noise about it."

"What's your business?"

"I told you before—minding my own business," said Jeff. I'm, you might say, a business investigator. I look into things, and if they're good enough I invest a little money to see if it will bring home more of its kind."

"A gambler," said the captain, "I see. Well, Mr. Gorman, there's one thing we want none of in Santa Paula, and that's gamblers. We have no gambling—"

"I heard you have an election coming up," Jeff remarked.

"Listen, Bub," the captain growled. "I want none of your guff. To me you're a gambler. Get your duds and get out of town in twenty-four hours. One deck of cards or one pair of dice in your possession after that and you'll go to the can. Now get out of here."

The inference was inescapable that a deck of cards would not be a difficult thing for the captain to find among Cash's effects if he didn't obey.

"Just in case you get ambitious, captain," said Cash, now deadly serious himself, "may I make a statement?"

"You may not," said the captain.

"Well, I'm going to make it regardless."

"Yeah," said the bulky detective, "you heard the captain. Get out and stay out."

"This is silly. I haven't broken any law," Jeff protested. "And if you try to frame me, you may wind up with the baby on your own doorstep." At the moment it sounded like wind even to him.

"Listen, brother, we got enough laws around here to keep you bouncing in and out of jail for the rest of your life," the captain said. "I never looked it up, but I believe we have a law against breathing. Now scram!"

After descending the stairs, Jeff confronted the sergeant at the desk.

"Where'll I find the police commissioner or the chief of police?" he demanded.

"The mayor is director of public safety," the sergeant told him.

"Thank you," said Jeff. The mayor had not lost any time letting him know how things stood. He went directly to

the *Sentinel* office reflecting that this at least was an opportunity to meet MacKenzie casually. He went into a prosperous-looking office on the main floor. A huge counter stretched from one side of the room to the other. He inquired of a girl behind the counter where he might find the editor.

"Through that door," she said, pointing to one which led to a lobby at the left. "Take the elevator to the fourth floor."

Cash went to the fourth floor and learned that the editor and publisher were unavailable. He was getting nowhere with a disinterested reception room boy, whom he had asked to show him to Brad MacKenzie.

"He ain't in."

"Well, isn't there a subeditor, or somebody around with whom I can talk?"

"What about, mister?" asked the youth unperturbed.

"I have a story, young man," said Cash, "and I want to talk to somebody in authority. You fix it up." He withdrew money from his pocket and peeled off a bill with great elaboration. "That'll help you find somebody for me." The young man darted through a double door marked "Local Room." Presently he returned and waved Cash into a huge city room.

"That fellow over there will see you," said the boy. "Thanks."

"Thank you," said Cash. "If your manners improve you'll do better next time."

On the opposite side of the room from the door he saw a man, a capable appearing fellow, seated at a desk. There was a hum of activity in the room, filled with a jumble of modern green metal desks mixed in with old decrepit numbers here and there. Cash walked across the room to the man the boy had pointed to and said:

"My name is Gorman, Thomas Jefferson Gorman."

The man looked up through straight brown eyes, deep set in a florid face. His hair was like wire and sandy-red and his mouth firm and friendly. He scanned Cash's face for an instant.

"You're Cash Gorman?" he asked, half questioningly, half stating a fact.

"You know me?" asked Jeff, gratified.

"Well," said the city editor, "we've had a story about you occasionally, even in this remote metropolis."

"Remote," said Jeff, "is correct. Haven't your city fathers heard the inquisition ended some time ago?"

"What's up?" inquired the man.

Cash related his brush with the police in elaborate details. He expressed indignation with each adjective he inserted into the recital. When he was through, the city editor said: "That was John Simmons."

"Which one?" asked Jeff, "the lord high executioner?"

"Yes," said the city editor. "He's captain of detectives, but he doesn't often play such a role. His is bigger stuff."

"I think," said Jeff, "that this is an outrage. I'm here on business. I'm not exactly a pauper; nor will my financial record be of criminal interest to the international revenue department. Why these men should single me out for such an indignity I can't guess."

"Might I ask what you are doing here?" the city editor said.

"I came with Millicent Crane," said Jeff. The city editor became interested.

"Were you in Palm Springs yesterday?"

"I was," said Jeff, "and strangely

enough so was Mayor Kobb. I met him."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" asked the city editor. He had made some notes, casually, on a pile of copy paper in front of him on the desk.

"It ought to make a story—might even make a nice editorial," said Jeff.

"It probably would," said the city editor. "Well, Mr. Gorman, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll discuss this matter with the boss and see what we can do. Where are you staying?"

"The Plandome," said Jeff. "And thank you for your courtesy. By the way, whom am I thanking?"

"MacKenzie. Brad MacKenzie, city editor of the *Sentinel*," said the man.

Jeff started. "You were a friend of Gordon Crane's?"

"Yes, I knew Crane. Too bad about him," said MacKenzie without emotion.

Jeff regained his composure and agreed with MacKenzie. He bade him good-by and went directly to the Plandome. He related his police experience to Jimmy Ranger.

"I suspect, Sir Galahad," said Ranger, "that somebody doesn't want us around very badly."

"We'll know by eleven-thirty tomorrow morning," said Jeff.

"Not ten-thirty?" asked Jimmy facetiously.

"No, the *Sentinel* comes out first at eleven-thirty," said Jeff.

"Oh," said Jimmy, "you complained to the press. Nice work. We'll be very popular with the city police."

"I hope so; I lodged my complaint with a friend. Brad MacKenzie."

"That was Crane's friend, huh?" asked Jimmy.

"Exactly," Jeff replied.

"We ought to get a sympathetic press," said Jimmy.

"I'm not too sure," Jeff said. He related his experience with MacKenzie. "Cold turkey," he concluded.

"That's funny," Jimmy said. "He seemed to me like a pretty solid citizen."

"Check," Jeff said. "He's just studying the ground. After all, he apparently knows some of the answers—maybe all of them, and the other man who knew the answer is dead."

"Do you think he knows it was murder?"

Jeff shrugged. "Not unless Millicent told him."

"She wouldn't do that," Jimmy said quickly.

"Again, romance." Jeff shook his head. "If you don't watch your step, some girl is going to marry you some day."

Jimmy blushed and tossed him a long telegram, explaining: "It's from Ramsey about that property. He couldn't get the names of the owners, but he has the descriptions and boundaries."

Jeff glanced over it briefly and handed it back. "Check it with the county people and see who owns it."

"I have a luncheon date," Jimmy said. He grinned. "I've hired a lawyer by the name of Kreisberg and he's checking it. His old man's a judge and the bank recommended him. I opened an account just to give us a little standing in the community."

"Did it ever occur to you that possibly I didn't want an account opened," Jeff snapped, angrily.

Jimmy was appalled. "Didn't you?"

"Yes, but I might not have," Jeff said curtly. There were times when he had to restrain Jimmy's desire to exercise his own initiative. "Before you begin cultivating your love life, get me the

back numbers of the *Sentinel* for the last three months."

Jimmy stared. "That's impossible."

"Bribe the librarian to lend 'em to you," Jeff said. "And send a waiter up here."

THE next three hours, Jeff spent in pondering over the back copies of the *Sentinel,* which were void of helpful clues. He noted, however, that the *Sentinel,* although it blasted the city's administration every three days or so, generally confined its blasting to minor affairs and was particularly loud in its praise of itself for having made Mayor Kobb mend his ways. With growing interest, he noted that regularly, once a week, the editorials pointed with pride to the present honest and efficient administration of the city's business, generally making it plain, in various ways, that things were different with the mayor now and that only a great man would admit his mistakes and remedy them.

"There is something familiar about the style of those editorials," he mused.

A phone call from Kreisberg, the lawyer, terminated this speculation.

"I've traced the ownership of that property, Mr. Gorman," Kreisberg reported. "The Central Valley Co."

"Who owns that?"

"The president is a man named Lider, but G. Horace Maele is generally understood to be the man. He also has quite a bit of property in his own name."

"Good," Jeff said. "Say, give me your home telephone number in case I get thrown in jail."

There was a short, startled pause. "Certainly," Kreisberg said finally, forcing a laugh. "It's Valley 5807."

"O. K., thanks."

"Don't you want to know where this property is?"

"If I do I'll send Mr. Ranger over," Jeff said.

"It's all uncultivated land," Kreisberg warned him, desperately, before Jeff hung up.

Humming softly, Jeff telephoned Ramsey in New York. "You made an offer on that property?" he asked.

"Listen, Cash, I'm a stock broker, not a real-estate broker," Ramsey protested. "You've got my office standing on its head."

"Five percent is five percent. What do you care whether you make it on stocks or cows?"

Ramsey was mollified. "At that rate, I'll take cows. They want $1,500 an acre for it. I offered 'em $900 and they said 'ridiculous—we'll call you back.' So I guess they're consulting their principals. Do you know who they are yet?"

"Yeah," Jeff replied. "Listen, get a couple of guys you can trust to inquire about the other blocks—offer forty-five percent and fifty percent less than asking price."

In vain Jeff scanned the news columns and the editorial page of the *Sentinel* when the first edition was brought to him in the morning.

"We're great copy," said Jimmy, looking up from his copy of the paper. "Probably thought it was a press agent stunt."

"Nope, not that, but we'll see what we can accomplish with a little press agentry. Take a handful of cash—five or six thousand dollars down into that valley. Do it right now and we can make the late editions."

Jeff ripped through the paper to the real-estate section. He ran his finger up and down the classified columns. Finally he came to one, headed: "The Good Earth of Valle Grande." It offered

choice lots in rich farm land for one thousand dollars each.

"This guy sounds good and noisy," Jeff commented. "Here, take this ad and tell him you are buying the stuff for me on speculation; that you may pick up a lot of stuff. Give him one hundred dollars better than his asking price and take as many options as you can get."

The reaction was quicker than Jeff had anticipated. He hadn't poured through more than half of a late adventure of his favorite fictional detective when his phone began to ring.

"Sorry, Mr. Gorman isn't here now," he replied to all calls until he got the one he was waiting for.

"Cash, this is Brad MacKenzie. We've got a story here about a guy named Ranger. He associated with you?"

"Yes. Mr. James Ranger is my associate, Brad. What's he in jail for?" asked Cash.

"He's not," said MacKenzie; "that's all I wanted to know. Read the paper."

"Oh," asked Jeff, "you like Mr. Ranger's activities better than mine?"

"Don't ask me, I only work here," replied MacKenzie. "Good-by."

A bellhop brought a copy of the next edition of the *Sentinel* to Jeff as soon as the presses rolled. The story appeared under an eight-column banner:

FAMED PROMOTER PLUNGES
INTO VALLEY REAL ESTATE
Cash Gorman Money Ties Up 3,000 Acres
In Swift Maneuver
Reported Representing Eastern Syndicate

Jeff read it, chuckling enthusiastically. The story related in great detail, with lurid adjectives reserved for the bears and wolves of Wall Street, the activity of one Thomas Jefferson Gorman in the real-estate market of Valle Grande. It painted a picture of a cagy promoter milching the farmers of their valued land through the agency of a figurehead, one James Ranger.

"Ranger has fronted for Gorman on many financial adventures. The conclusion is obvious. Gorman is secretly trying to corner the Valle Grande land market," the article concluded.

About the time he finished the article, Jimmy came into the room.

"You have created a furor," said Jeff. "How did you work it with so little money?"

"The magic of your name, my liege lord and master," said Jimmy. "If you pick up half the stuff I've optioned you'll be a dirt farmer, cattleman, and fruit grower in thirty days."

The two phones, one in each room, rang simultaneously.

"We won't have time for that," said Jeff. "Here's where the interesting action starts. Get downstairs and have the manager put on an extra phone girl to intercept the crackpot calls. Everybody who owns a half a lot and thinks he can make a half million profit will call."

Jeff went down the square to the detective headquarters and barged in on Captain John Simmons' office.

"Just called to let you know I'm a taxpayer now and I don't appreciate threats," he said.

"Keep your nose clean, that's all," said Simmons, in his flat nasal voice. He was reading the story of Jeff's venture into the valley real-estate market.

CHAPTER VI.

MAC KENZIE SETS A PRICE.

AT dinner that night, Jeff learned from Martin Rossi and Jimmy Ranger that Brad MacKenzie had called upon Millicent Crane.

"What did he tell her?" Jeff demanded.

Ranger shrugged. "He seemed to be asking all the questions from what I could learn."

"Did he know that Crane had been murdered?" Jeff asked, watching Rossi closely.

"I don't know," Jimmy replied, glancing toward Rossi. The banker wet his lips nervously.

"Millicent thinks not," Rossi said. "I . . . I asked her not to say anything about it. Don't you think that best?"

Jeff nodded, casually, and when they left the table indicated to Rossi and Ranger that he wanted to be alone for a little while to think things over.

"Going upstairs?" Jimmy asked, curiously.

"No. I think I'll sit in the lobby for a while," Jeff told him, picking out a conspicuous seat and sinking into it.

Ranger hesitated, then grinned. "Waiting for somebody?"

Jeff inclined his head. "I might be."

Ranger smiled. "So you won't talk, huh, pop?" he demanded. "Just going to sit here and then if Brad MacKenzie shows up you'll pretend you were expecting him and if he don't show, you were just lobby sitting."

Gorman laughed. "My mind is an open book, I see." He motioned Jimmy off. "Go away; he might come and I don't want a witness to scare him off. After all, apparently he's looking around for collaboration and I'm a ready-made collaborator."

Inconspicuously, Ranger sneaked down behind a newspaper nearby and Jeff gave himself over to drawing triangles with eyebrows and other peculiar objects on the backs of envelopes until the square, sturdy figure of MacKenzie appeared in the lobby door. The newspaperman walked to the desk and chatted with the clerk a moment and then started out again, stopping in surprise at the sight of Gorman and calling a greeting.

"Take this casually," MacKenzie said, approaching to shake hands; "just as if this were an unexpected meeting." He removed a notebook and said loudly: "Glad to see you again, Mr. Gorman; wanted to ask you a few questions about your activities today." In a lower voice, he added: "Can you meet me at 11 o'clock at the Sentinel Building? I want to speak to you privately."

Jeff nodded. "Absolutely. Can I get in?"

MacKenzie's voice was little more than a whisper. "There's a night bell—I'll tell the watchman you're expected." He pocketed the notebook after asking a few harmless questions and said: "You may be followed. Please make sure you're not seen entering the building." MacKenzie's eyes met his solidly. "You might pretend to be a little piqued with me just now—just in case."

Jeff adopted his haughtiest attitude. "I'm sorry to say, Mr. MacKenzie, that I don't care for your attitude or your newspaper," he declared loudly. "Apparently you are not interested in printing the truth and, under the circumstances, I consider your questions impertinent."

Turning his back on the editor he strolled toward the newsstand without looking around and in a moment Ranger stepped up beside him and said: "He's gone. He's being tailed, too."

Quickly, Jeff outlined the situation. "You tail 'em both," he ordered. "If possible, you might see if you can lose his shadow some place for him so there won't be anyone around when I call on him."

"That will be a pleasure," Ranger

grinned, rubbing his knuckles.

"No rough stuff," Jeff cautioned. "I don't want *you* to land in jail, too—"

Jimmy, however, was already on his way and Jeff, a bit worried lest Jimmy put his foot into something unpleasant, set off for his own rendezvous with MacKenzie earlier than he had intended.

A gentleman in a pair of old-fashioned high shoes, built for comfort and walking rather than appearances, seemed to be taking a detectivelike interest in him, so he descended the stairs from the lobby to the men's room. Behind him, as he rounded a corner in the stairway, he heard following footsteps. Jumping forward as soon as he was safely out of sight, he opened a door marked "engineer" and found himself in the company of an elderly, red-faced and walrus-mustached gentleman who swung around in surprise and made a wry face. "You got the wrong door, mister," he said.

Jeff grinned and removed a heavy fold of bills from his pocket, removing a ten. "Ten dollars will get you one that there isn't a rear exit from this basement without going back through that door I just entered."

The engineer scowled at him suspiciously and Jeff added: "I'm a guest, Thomas Jefferson Gorman." Noting a newspaper on the man's desk, he flipped to the front page and pointed at a picture of himself. "That's me. I'm just playing a little joke on a friend."

The doorknob behind them turned. Jeff put his foot against it, picking up a chair and sliding it quietly beneath the knob. With the door secured, he turned back, his fingers to his lips.

The engineer looked from the newspaper picture to Jeff and back again, then smiled and beckoned toward another door. "You sure you're just playin' a trick?" he shouted as they entered a machinery-cluttered room.

Jeff nodded.

"O. K.," the man grinned. "You got a bet."

Jeff paid him off as he reached a rear street via an alleyway and then made directly for the Sentinel Building. It was but 10:30 p. m. when he arrived and he loitered along, looking at the shop windows as he went and keeping a careful eye on the Sentinel entrance. Noting nothing suspicious he finally approached and drifted casually past an alley that led to a truck-loading platform. It was dimly lit, but he saw no one and was about to continue into the building when he heard someone go "psst."

Halting uneasily, he stared into the dark alley again and then was reassured to hear Jimmy Ranger's voice. "Jeff—it's me. Slip down here a minute."

Glancing quickly around, Jeff turned into the alley: "What's the matter? Where are you?"

A hand grabbed his arm and pulled him into a small doorway. "Right here," Ranger said. "Listen, there's something very peculiar going on around here—that guy who was tailing MacKenzie was a cop."

"How do you know?" Jeff demanded, not greatly surprised.

Ranger pushed open the door behind him and in the dim light from within Jeff saw that he held a detective's badge in his hand. "Good night!" Jeff exclaimed. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothin' he won't get over," Jimmy replied happily.

"Well, throw that thing away," Jeff said, adding hurriedly: "Wait a minute—wipe your fingerprints off it."

Ranger complied and tossed the badge out into the alley as Jeff snapped: "How many times have I told you not to rough up people unless it's necessary? Particu-

larly never jam yourself up with the law—"

"I don't think the law around here is legal," Jimmy complained.

"I don't care what you think," Jeff growled. "Illegal actions by two parties don't make a thing legal. Get me?"

Ranger nodded: "O. K.—O. K., but you forced my hand when you came snoopin' along here a half hour early." He motioned Jeff to a door and closed it behind them. "When we got here, MacKenzie went in this door. Evidently it's a fire door of some kind. Anyway, he had a key and pretty soon another guy came along and he had a key, too. Then a third man went into the front door."

"How did you open this door?" Jeff demanded.

"I didn't," Jimmy said. "The cop did. He had a key, too." He pointed to a flight of concrete steps. "Apparently, those go upstairs and that door leads to the main corridor. Maybe there's a little reception being arranged for you."

Jeff considered the possibilities of a frame-up, but finally shook his head. "It doesn't add up to anything. What did the man look like who came in this way?"

"Short, dark and heavy as well as I could make out," Ranger replied.

"Possibly he works here," Jeff replied. He motioned Jimmy toward the alley.

"What's the idea?" Ranger demanded. "Why don't you go upstairs this way—maybe you'll find out what's going on?"

Jeff shook his head. "Sometimes I wonder, Jimmy—did it ever occur to you that we don't have any business using this door and that there's a watchman inside with a perfectly legal right to shoot anybody seen prowling around the premises."

"Oh," Ranger said. "Well, I still think you—"

"Shhh!" Jeff cautioned him. Footsteps sounded on the stairway. Quietly they made their way out the door, closing it behind them, and ducked down the alley to a setback in the wall of the building. A moment later, a short, square-built figure was outlined in the light as the side door opened. The man closed the door behind him and Jimmy Ranger nudged Jeff, indicating this was the man who had originally entered. The man proceeded cautiously to the corner of the alley, but then, to the astonishment of the two men watching him, he remained in the shadows, watching the street. Finally, from the direction of the front entrance, a tall man appeared in the mouth of the alley.

"Landry," the square-built man called. The tall, rather thin figure who had been hurrying intently along the street, paused. He looked uncertainly toward the mouth of the alley and the first man stepped out into the light of the street lamp. "I want to talk to you, Landry."

Jeff and Jimmy Ranger edged forward to hear better as the tall man nodded, saying: "Hello, Donaldi."

"So you're the bird whose been talking to MacKenzie, huh," the square-built man demanded. "You ought to know better than to run around telling fairy stories—Mayor Kobb wouldn't like it if he knew his chief inspector of plants and structures was poppin' off."

The tall man's voice—deep and low-pitched—answered steadily: "I don't know what you're talking about, Donaldi!"

"Oh, yes you do," Donaldi said. "I was upstairs. I just had a little talk with MacKenzie myself, except I didn't leave right away—get it?" He seized the other man by a coat lapel. "I heard

what you said and I'm not forgettin' it, but you'd better forget it. Who else have you told?"

Landry wet his lips nervously, looking up and down the almost deserted street. "Nobody," he said finally. There was suspicion in his voice as he added: "What were you doing talking to MacKenzie?"

Donaldi laughed. "Don't play innocent. You're gettin' yours and pretty slick. You know you got me by the scalp, but if anybody ever finds out or you try another shake, God help you!" He pushed the tall man away. "Go on, you rat, beat it."

Landry walked off, silently, and Donaldi, after watching him for a moment, turned in the other direction.

"Whew!" Jeff said, softly. "Mr. Landry—the chief inspector of plants and structures. And I wonder who Donaldi is?"

"Dunno," Ranger replied. "Did you get the same idea that I did! Landry has been passing information along to MacKenzie and MacKenzie has been using it to blackmail Donaldi."

Jeff nodded as they stepped cautiously out into the lighted street. "We *do* meet interesting people."

MACKENZIE was waiting for Jeff in the city room, seated at his desk. Curiously, Jeff noted that all the lights were on.

The editor rose and looked suspiciously at Ranger. "My assistant, Mr. Ranger," Jeff said.

"I mentioned a private conversation," MacKenzie said.

"So you did," Jeff replied, looking pointedly toward Ranger, who faded to a far corner of the room. "Incidentally, do you know a man by the name of Donaldi?"

MacKenzie, who had been watching Ranger's progress out of earshot, jerked his head around nervously to look at Jeff again. He seemed alarmed. "Yes. why?"

Jeff shrugged. "I just wondered. Heard his name mentioned as a prominent local real-estate character and wondered who he was."

MacKenzie frowned. "Real estate? Maybe so, but only with his left hand. He's a contractor—the biggest in town."

That might explain a lot, Jeff thought. A contractor might have good cause to be alarmed of a chief inspector of plants and structures. "A friend of Kobb's, I presume?"

MacKenzie smiled. "What do you think?" he asked. "Contractors who want public business have to be friends of Kobb."

Jeff nodded, smiling, but he was still puzzled. If Donaldi was a friend of Kobb and Landry was a municipal official, probably appointive, one or the other of them must be crossing up Kobb. He didn't press the point. "You had something to tell me?"

MacKenzie drummed thoughtfully on the desk for a moment, examining Gorman with shrewd eyes. "I don't know why you've dealt yourself into this situation, but apparently you feel money is to be made in land speculation here. Well, it is. But you have to know the answers or you'll get lost."

Jeff nodded. "That's what I'm trying to find out; the answers."

"All right," MacKenzie said. "I know them. But if I tell you what they are I may take my life in my hands—"

Quickly, Jeff interposed. "What makes you say that?"

"I don't think Gordon Crane's death was an accident," MacKenzie replied.

"I think maybe he was murdered. He knew the answers."

Jeff pressed him for details, but MacKenzie refused to say anything more about his suspicions. Lighting a pipe, he blew smoke thoughtfully at the ceiling and then went on: "It was I that furnished Crane with most of his information. I could give you the same information, but if I do, it may ruin me professionally and financially if you make any mistakes in using the information. I have to insure myself against that."

"Naturally," Jeff agreed, watching him closely. Suddenly, his nostrils were assailed by a familiar odor. He glanced at the pipe in MacKenzie's hands and then, with the nose for tobacco smell of a man who doesn't himself smoke, recalled the tobacco odor about the man who had attacked him in Rossi's room at Palm Springs. It could be a coincidence, of course, but it was worth a chance. He looked straight at MacKenzie. "I thought we had met before, Mr. MacKenzie. May I ask what it was you wanted of Martin Rossi in Palm Springs?"

MacKenzie's features lost their straightforward, impressive look. His lips curled down at the left corner and his eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. "I wasn't in Palm Springs," he snarled. "I have information—all you want to know; the key to this situation. Without which I know you can't get anywhere no matter how long you stay here. With it, you can clean up. The price is twenty-five thousand dollars in cash. Take it or leave it."

Cash pursed his lips thoughtfully. He'd been badly mistaken about Brad MacKenzie. "O. K.," he said finally. "I'll take it, but I don't have that much cash available. I'll have to send to San Francisco for it."

MacKenzie shrugged his shoulders. "You may be too late. And don't try to cross me. I'll give you until noon tomorrow."

Jeff thought it over. "Let's say one o'clock. I don't believe we can arrange it before then, although I could get you fifteen thousand dollars in the morning and the rest later in the day."

MacKenzie shook his head. "You won't chisel me ten thousand dollars, Gorman—all or nothing."

"I'll have to have some assurance that your information is worth twenty-five thousand dollars," Jeff said. "When I come to see you I'll have the money, but I'll pay you only five thousand dollars. If what you have to say sounds good, you'll get the rest."

MacKenzie laughed. "I can give you half the solution in five words. When you hear it, you'll want the rest quick, because time will be a factor if you hope to capitalize on the information." He arose. "Meet me here, then, at one p. m. tomorrow and we'll drop over to a little bar around the corner for our talk."

CHAPTER VII.

MEETING WITH DONALDI.

AS the night watchman rode them downstairs in the freight elevator of the Sentinel Building, Jimmy Ranger thrust a piece of paper into Jeff's hands, asking casually: "You want these addresses?"

Jeff glanced at them quickly and grinned. One was that of Vince Donaldi, contractor, and gave his home and office addresses. The other was the home address of Fred Landry.

"The only men of that name listed in the book?" he asked.

Jimmy nodded his head, somewhat nettled by this lack of appreciation of his perception. "Do we visit them?"

"We won't have to visit Landry," Jeff said, pointing toward the glass-paned doors which the watchman swung open. Landry was waiting outside. "He's come back for another little conference—evidently to report on what Mr. Donaldi said to him."

Landry nodded briefly to the watchman as the door swung back, asking: "Is MacKenzie upstairs?" His eyes took in Cash and Jimmy Ranger and he hesitated. "I saw the lights and thought he was was probably still here. Or did you gentlemen have them on?"

Jeff shook his head. "No. We're not members of the staff, Mr. Landry. We were just visiting him ourselves." He introduced himself, adding in a low voice: "We'd like to have a talk with you about Mr. Donaldi."

Landry, who had a long, somber face, looked first startled and then fearful. "I . . . I don't recall your name, Mr. Gorman."

Jeff identified himself and Jimmy, producing a newspaper to point his introduction.

"You goin' upstairs?" the watchman demanded, irritably. "I gotta be makin' my rounds—"

"No—not right now," Landry replied. "I'll . . . I'll call Mr. MacKenzie later." Turning, he accompanied Jeff and Ranger to the street. "I don't understand your reference to Donaldi."

Ranger jerked a thumb toward a coffee pot restaurant and Jeff turned into it, ushering Landry before them. Seating themselves in a booth, there was a strained silence for a moment while Jeff studied the chief building inspector. "You were here earlier tonight to see MacKenzie. You brought MacKenzie some information—undoubtedly further information on something you already had told him. Donaldi is concerned in what you know. Later you saw Donaldi. You didn't know he had been to see MacKenzie, too. But from what he said, you got the idea that MacKenzie was doing business with Donaldi. Right?"

Landry was pale. "What are you doing here, Mr. Gorman?" he demanded. "What are you talking about—"

Jeff laughed. "I'm not sure myself; but those are the facts. And the information would have an effect on real-estate values." He pointed to the newspaper. "That's what I'm interested in—real estate." He paused and then said slowly. "MacKenzie offered to sell me that information—I'd just as soon buy it from you."

Landry jumped violently to his feet, knocking over his coffee in his haste. "What do you think I am—" he asked hoarsely. He turned to leave. Jeff grasped his arm, saying: "Wait a minute. I'm an honest operator. I don't give a damn about your local politics, but if you know something you might as well cash in because the lid's going to be blown off here and quick."

Landry tore his sleeve from Jeff's grasp. "I don't know what you're talking about, Gorman," he declared. "I'm an honest officer—an elected official. I just—" He rushed off muttering something in a hoarse tone.

Ranger stared at Jeff in astonishment. "Say, what is this, anyway? What's the matter with him?"

"Nothing," Jeff replied, looking after the rattled man. "He's just what he says, an honest official. And very much in the middle and worried to death." He picked up a knife and began making marks on the tablecloth. "His job would be to supervise the inspection of any kind

of structure, public or private, that was erected, would it not?"

Jimmy nodded. "I guess so—safety inspection. All the plans have to go to his office to see if they comply with the law, I suppose. Then he sees that they're put up as planned—that is, he or his deputies."

Jeff cocked an eyebrow. "Call up Rossi and tell him to tell us who the contractor was on the Valle Grande Dam. And also tell him to hire a car and make for Frisco—unless he can get a train—he's to bring back twenty-five thousand dollars; no, make it thirty thousand dollars in currency."

Ranger returned in a few minutes, grinning. "He was in bed. He said he wasn't a bank messenger, but he finally agreed to go."

"And the dam contractor?" Jeff asked.

"Donaldi," Ranger replied. "I called a cab."

The contractor's home, however, was dark and, on a chance, they went to his office, located on the outskirts of the city. The office itself was a frame structure built alongside a massive machinery-storage shed. A watchman took their names and returned to the door a few moments later followed by Donaldi.

"Well?" the contractor asked. His face, like his body, was square built, his eyes dark, hard and oversized.

Cash introduced himself and Jimmy Ranger and Donaldi cut him short as he suggested that they might have something of mutual interest to discuss.

"Kobb told me about you two swindlers," he snapped. "I don't know what you're sellin', but I don't want any. *Scram.*"

"Wait a minute," Jeff said sharply. "There's something I want to ask you about—"

Donaldi signaled to the watchman. "Call the boys." To Jeff he added: "I don't want to talk with you—now or any time. You better leave while you can. If you don't, I'll call the cops when we get through with you and have you arrested for trespassing. And don't start tellin' me any fairy stories about who you are. I don't care who you are. Get it?"

Jeff nodded. "I guess we're not wanted." He grabbed Ranger's arm just as Jimmy was about to give Donaldi a lesson in courtesy. "Come on, Jimmy." In the cab, he laughed.

"What's funny?" Ranger demanded.

"Our truculent friend's faith in Mayor Kobb's ability to discourage curiosity on the part of strangers is touching," Cash commented. "Can you give me any good reason why the citizens of a free country put up with people who create political machines like Kobb's?"

"No, but if you have any respect for your bankroll, I can give you a good reason why you ought to leave the problem to the citizens of Santa Paula to solve," Jimmy commented dryly. "All we seem to be doing is spending money, and for nothing. Or do you know what you're doing, Cash?"

Jeff laughed. "No, but if we keep stirring around, something's bound to come to the surface."

"Uh-hum!" Jimmy commented. "Two economic corpses—yours and mine."

CHAPTER VIII.

SHOOTING HIGH.

UNEXPECTEDLY, the next morning, they received a call from Rankin, the C. A. A. inspector, requesting them to be at the airport at 11 a. m.

"Request is just a polite way of putting it," Jeff commented. "I wonder if

he's found out anything."

Immediately solicitous about Millicent Crane, Jimmy called her home and learned she already had gone to the airport. When they arrived they found her, accompanied by Filon, her father's friend, weeping quietly in a small room off the office of the airport manager. "He was murdered," she told Jeff. "You were right—I'd begun to think maybe it was just an accident, but . . . but—"

Mayor Kobb at that moment stepped from the office, followed by Rankin. The mayor was accompanied by Captain Simmons, who exchanged curt nods with Jeff and Jimmy, as did the mayor. Kobb, however, ignored Millicent Crane and seemed relieved when she contented herself with a stony glance in his direction.

"Will you come in, please, Mr. Gorman?" Rankin asked. He nodded to Jimmy. "And you, too, please, Mr. Ranger. Where is Mr. Rossi?"

Jeff explained that Rossi had gone to San Francisco and would be back around one-thirty or two o'clock.

"Good," Rankin said casually. "By the way, Mr. Gorman, for whom were you waiting at the airport in Palm Springs on the afternoon that Mr. Crane crashed."

"For Crane," Jeff admitted.

"Ah," Rankin said. "Mr. Rossi said you were all waiting for a friend of yours, Mr. Gorman."

Jeff nodded, recalling this fact very clearly. "He was probably a bit confused," he explained. "When the accident occurred, Mayor Kobb declared that Crane was making the trip especially to see him. Mr. Rossi thought that Crane was coming to see us. The trip was supposed to have been a private one concerning business and he had no desire for the mayor to realize that. Just why, I can't say. Also, he was puzzled about the mayor's presence."

"What business?" Rankin demanded.

"We don't know," Jeff said frankly. He explained as much of the situation as had been explained to him by Rossi at the time of the accident.

"Thank you," Rankin said finally. "In other words, he was to place information —just what you don't know—before you. Right?"

Jeff nodded.

"How did you know his plane had been tampered with?" Rankin demanded.

Millicent evidently had let slip the fact that they had been aware of the murder that night. Jeff jerked his head toward Ranger.

"I picked up a piece of the oil-pump fitting, and felt what I thought was emery dust," Ranger explained, blushing. "I put it back."

Rankin smiled slightly. "Rather slight evidence. It might have been dirt."

"Not the way it landed," Jimmy retorted. He didn't, however, mention the Sandusky salesman and Rankin didn't press the point.

"How about Mr. MacKenzie?" Rankin asked. "Have you talked with him?"

"He had nothing to tell me at the time I talked with him," Jeff explained truthfully. Millicent must have mentioned MacKenzie's association with her brother, also. "Have you sent for him?"

"Captain Simmons is picking him up now," Rankin said.

"Picking him up?" Jeff exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

Rankin laughed. "I didn't mean it precisely that way," he said. "We weren't able to locate Mr. MacKenzie at his office and Captain Simmons said he would look him up when he returned to the city. Naturally, during the leave

of absence of Chief of Police Kelsey, Captain Simmons is in charge of law enforcement locally and we have informed him of the facts." He arose and showed them out.

Mayor Kobb was in the main waiting room of the airport and he approached Gorman and Ranger as they appeared, shaking his head. "A nasty business," he remarked, ignoring the unpleasant scene at Palm Springs as if it never had happened. "Have you had an opportunity to speak to MacKenzie?"

"Not exactly," Jeff replied slowly. "Not as long as I wished to, at least."

Kobb shot a quick glance at him. "Never thought MacKenzie would turn out to be a murderer."

"What?" Jeff demanded.

"Didn't Rankin tell you?" Kobb asked, a cold smile curling about his lips. "MacKenzie saw Crane off. He was in the hangar when Crane was getting his ship ready for the flight. He was the last man to speak with Crane and he was alone in the hangar for a few minutes. Captain Simmons saw him there."

"What was Captain Simmons doing out there?" Jeff asked.

"Minding his own business," Kobb snapped. "Always a good policy." He fingered the flesh beneath his left eye, still discolored from Jimmy's blow. "A detective was sent around to MacKenzie's house just a few minutes ago. They found emery dust in the garage— Looks bad for MacKenzie, doesn't it?"

"Captain Simmons seems to be right on the job," Jeff commented.

Kobb smiled. "He takes care of things very well."

Jeff practically ran to their car. "Jump in," he shouted to Ranger, sliding behind the wheel himself. "I want to see MacKenzie before those cops get to him."

Cash stepped on the gas, but just as they swung around the end of the hangar nearest the road onto which the airport drive opened, a police car zoomed out from one side and locked fenders with them.

"Where the hell you think you're going?" the cop yelled. He was one of the detectives who had picked up Jeff the previous day. "Oh—it's you again, huh?" He inspected the damage, which principally was done to Jeff's car, the fender being smashed in so far against the wheel that the car couldn't be driven.

"Nice driving," Jeff commented. "Caught me very neatly."

The cop jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "O. K.—you two; pile in. Reckless driving, speeding, insulting an officer. You'll get the book thrown at you this time."

Ranger made a wry face. "I don't think we're going to see MacKenzie."

"You're going to see him," Cash exclaimed. "Hire a cab and get in to town. Rossi's due at the station in ten minutes. If you miss him there, go to the hotel. Get the money and meet MacKenzie before the boys get to him. If we don't see him first, we may never get what we want out of him. Scram!"

Jimmy started on the run for the administration building.

"Hey, you," the detective yelled after him. "Come back here. You're under arrest."

Jeff interposed himself in the officer's way. "For what?" he demanded. "I was driving the automobile and it's my car."

"He's a witness," the cop said. He started to draw his revolver.

"Wait a minute," Jeff shouted, standing squarely in front of the officer. "You

fire that gun and it'll be murder or attempted murder and I'll see that you're prosecuted if it takes my last dollar." He was prepared to grab the cop's revolver, but the man hesitated. "You know you don't need a witness. I admit I was driving fast and I assume all responsibility for the accident and any damage to the police automobile."

The detective shoved the revolver back down in its holster.

"You wait here," he said, elbowing Jeff aside and starting after Ranger. Jimmy, however, had gained the administration building and he jumped into a cab, wisely ordering the driver to take a back road out of the airport. Cursing, the detective returned and roughly ordered Cash into the police automobile.

"This accident was a nice little plant, I'd say," Jeff needled him as they started for town.

"You've said enough for one day," the detective told him. "The captain isn't going to be very happy to see you."

"On the contrary, I think he'll be delighted. By the way—where is Chief Kelsey?"

"On a leave of absence," the detective told him, adding contemptuously: "If you got any ideas about running to Kelsey, get rid of 'em. He's a long way off and having a nice quiet rest and he's going to be gone a long time."

Chief Kelsey might be worth cultivating, Jeff thought. "What's the matter?" he inquired. "Couldn't he stomach Kobb any more or couldn't the mayor get rid of him legally?"

"You've been listenin' to a lot of talk," the detective growled. "He was a soft-

"Get in the car," the detective commanded gruffly, "we got orders to find out what your racket is and what you're doing in Santa Paula, wise guy."

hearted old boob and always trying to interfere with justice, so Kobb got rid of him, see? You can't buck Kobb, but if you're smart he'll take care of you, see? Like Kelsey. He got told he could take a leave of absence with pay or get fired on departmental charges. So Kelsey was smart. He took a leave."

"Very convenient," Jeff commented.

"Everything seems to be happening while he's gone." He was about to attempt to needle a little more information out of his captor when their automobile swung into Sentinel Square and he saw Brad MacKenzie walk from a restaurant and start across the street.

"Hey, MacKenzie," he yelled, leaning out the window of the car. "Meet Ranger at the Plandome Hotel."

"Shut up, you," the detective said, stepping on the gas and shooting through a red light. Turning, Jeff saw Brad MacKenzie look around and then, simultaneously, the sirens of several police cars cut loose and three or four shots rang out. A police car whizzed around the corner, narrowly missing the one in which they rode, forcing the detective driving Jeff to halt his automobile.

Captain Simmons jumped from the other car and ran across the street, gun in hand, followed by a plain-clothes man. From a jewelry store adjacent to the restaurant in which MacKenzie had been eating three men ran, guns in their hands, firing as they came. Spectators scattered. Simmons and the plain-clothes man with him returned the fire. MacKenzie turned and started to run out of the line of fire, but suddenly he stumbled and pitched face downward on the sidewalk.

Jeff started to jump from the automobile in which he was a prisoner. The detective caught his arm, yelling: "Where you think you're going?" Simultaneously, he slipped the car in gear and started off.

"Hey," Jeff protested. "There's a holdup going on back there—a man's been hurt."

"So what?" the detective demanded. "I've got a prisoner to take back to jail. There's cops there to take care of the holdup."

Looking back, Jeff saw that the other police cars whose sirens he had heard were all entering the square from the south side. The bandits were escaping to the north. Only Captain Simmons and the man with him, whom Jeff recognized as the other of the detectives who had picked him up the previous day, were in a position to stop them.

"Seems to me they're shooting a little high," he mused thoughtfully.

CHAPTER IX.

BURSTING EVIDENCE.

JEFF gained his freedom an hour and forty minutes later. Jimmy and their lawyer awaited him in the squad room at police headquarters.

"What happened to MacKenzie?" Jeff demanded.

"He's dead, Cash," Jimmy replied. He started to tell about the accident.

Jeff cut him short. "I saw it." He described what had taken place. "I'm just wondering whose bullet it was that cut him down—the bandits' or the cops' —which means Simmons'!"

"The bandits got away," Ranger said. "But somebody dropped a revolver and a citizen picked it up. Apparently all the bandits had their revolvers when they left the scene, but this one may be the one that killed MacKenzie. And guess whose fingerprints were found on it?"

Jeff stared. "Whose?"

"Donaldi—the contractor," Ranger replied. "That's what one of the reporters told me, anyway. Donaldi's been picked up."

"Too many coincidences around here," Jeff said. "Anything else?"

"Yeah; apparently everybody in town was there when MacKenzie was killed—Millicent Crane, Rossi, Donaldi, G. Horace Maele and even that inspector of buildings we met last night—Landry. All within shooting distance, too."

"Everybody but Mayor Kobb," Jeff commented. "He's never around when anything happens." He thanked Lawyer Kreisberg and asked him to stand by, adding to Ranger: "I trust you have acquired rapid-transit facilities—we must be getting around."

"It's outside, my lord," mocked Jimmy.

"Fine," replied Jeff. "To the airport."

"What's first on the docket?" asked Jimmy.

"It's improper, impolite and somewhat foolhardy, I might say, to leave the government of the United States holding the bag while one of its favorite witnesses suffers from a sudden case of death," replied Jeff.

"What do you mean?"

"An active partner, if that partner has a long, white, spiked beard, can be of inestimable assistance in this enterprise," said Jeff.

"You mean, you think there is room for Uncle Samivel to stick his nose in here?" asked Jimmy.

"Ample," said Jeff. "There is something very striking in these deaths, James. Something which traces back to us. Perhaps to others. But we know about one similarity."

Jimmy tooled the car through Grande Boulevard and out the highway toward the airport. He was silent a while.

"Certainly," he said finally; "why didn't I see it before?"

"I'll pick up such things, James," replied Jeff. "You watch the road. And keep this gasoline glutton stuffed. I think we may need it for further use."

"Think we ought to go gallivanting in the country?"

"I do," said Jeff. "But there will be, about this time, an eager young man on the scene at the airport. I have some work for him to do. Some work which will keep him busy for several hours. In that time we can get all the information we want. For, after all, we are here to discover a leak which will cost a bank for which we are working a hatful of coin. There are agencies for apprehending criminals and while they might get information that would be helpful where we are going, I think they will more likely catch the murderer where we shall send them."

"Might I ask which way we are going next? North or south?"

"I think we might find things more informative to the north, James. Up in the vicinity of the Grande Valle Dam," said Cash. Jimmy wheeled the car around the administration building of the airport and pushed it into a parking space next to a police car.

"We have company," said Jeff.

They went directly to the room where the C. A. A. inspector had conducted the investigation of Gordon Crane's crash. Cash was ushered into the office and was considerably relieved to find that the inspector was not closeted with a member of the local constabulary. Instead he was occupied with a youngish-looking man in his thirties. He looked fit and, as Cash had prophesied, he was eager; as eager as a bird dog pointed in a field of high grass.

"Special Agent Falls of the F. B. I.

Mr. Gorman," said the inspector. "I've just heard the news."

"Oh," said Jeff. "Captain Simmons called you?"

"Yes," said the inspector, "he did."

"I was counting on that, inspector," said Jeff. "Mr. Falls, I am in possession of a startling fact which I think is sufficient grounds for the government to enter this case."

"MacKenzie's murder?" asked the F. B. I. man.

"Exactly," replied Jeff. "You may not try to inject yourself and your department on the grounds that it is purely a local matter. But I can show you, I believe, that this is not exactly a local matter. In fact the manner in which both Crane and MacKenzie were disposed of will prove without a question that both men met their death because they were in possession of certain knowledge. What that knowledge was, I do not know. All I know is that MacKenzie offered to help me."

The agent interrupted. "Might I ask, Mr. Gorman, what your position is in this thing?"

"I'm here as a special investigator for the Banca California; brought here at the behest of an old friend, Mr. Martin Rossi, of whom you have unquestionably heard. The San Francisco banker," added Jeff, inferring it would be a penal offense not to have heard of Martin.

"I know Mr. Rossi," said the agent to Jeff's surprise.

"First, understand this," continued Jeff. "This boy Crane died in an airplane. That's government business. Is it not?"

"It is," said the C. A. A. inspector.

"All right," replied Jeff. "He died of criminal causes. Somebody doctored the motor of his plane and he crashed."

"That's right," agreed the inspector.

"The interesting similarity in these two murders begins here," said Jeff. "The last person who saw Crane alive was MacKenzie. What they were arguing about is a matter that won't be cleared up until you learn why both were killed. But there is a startling piece of evidence, startling to me at least," said Jeff, pausing for effect.

"What's that?" asked the F. B. I. man.

"First off," said Jeff, "wouldn't it occur to you that something more than coincidence is playing a part in things when the captain of detectives is within earshot of both deaths, figuratively. He admits he was here before Crane took off, in fact he saw him talking with MacKenzie. Then he's Johnny on the job when MacKenzie gets shot, in the back of the head."

"Ballistics will prove whether it was his gun or that which was found," said the agent.

Jeff got to his feet and picked up his hat. He stood for a second or two waiting to see if there would be anything else that the agent might want to pump out of him. He wanted to get out as quickly as possible before the agent asked him if there was any suspicion on his part as to where Crane and MacKenzie might have met on common ground. The agent had no further questions, however.

"How goes it on this front?" Jeff asked Jimmy as he jumped into the car beside him. "That standing by itself all the time?" He pointed to the police car.

"That is occupied by a police officer with telephonitis," said Jimmy.

"Ah," said Jeff, "a stooge of the good captain's, no doubt. Back to town."

"I thought we were going north," said Jimmy.

"We are," said Jeff, "but we'll try the

southern route to get north. That'll confound our policeman friend there; a little, anyway."

They drove in along Grande Boulevard some distance. Presently they came to a street which led them to a bridge and Jeff ordered Jimmy to turn down that street and to cross the bridge.

"Where does this get us?" asked Jimmy.

"I hope," said Jeff, "to a road on the other side which will lead to the dam."

There was a gas station across the river and Jimmy stopped the car. Jeff spoke to the attendant and asked him if the road to the north would reach the dam.

"This is the side to go up if you only want to see the dam," said the attendant. "About four miles up you'll come to the sight of her and she's a beauty from this side. You're up on the mountain over there, but over here you're below her. She's a dilly."

"Fine," said Jeff and they drove up the river. "I hope this puddle jumper can scale the side of that monument," he continued.

"It won't have to if it's a dam," said Jimmy. "Somewhere it's got to be tied to two hills."

"River must change its course or something," said Jeff, "because all the hills are over there. This is practically level ground."

"There's a gradual rise," said Jimmy, his engineering instincts returning without warning. "What they done, I guess, is to back the river up a gorge of a tributary, if this is the main course. They talk of an artificial lake that backs up twenty-five miles. That's what they must have done in this terrain."

They wound through the valley and just as Jimmy forecast there was a gradual rise. About four and a half miles up the river they sighted the dam. But it stuck out from a hill on one side and then disappeared around the center of the landscape in what from the angle they approached appeared to be a full turn.

"That's what they've done," confirmed Jimmy. "They've forced that river up through those hills, creating a lake and a lot of area to catch the winter thaws. It'll be a terrific water shed for irrigation purposes."

When they were opposite the dam they could see that it stepped up the side of the hills and that there were false terraces erected around it on the river side. They had to drive eighteen miles up the river side to get to the other end of the dam. And when they got to the west side of it, in the foothill region, they found themselves confronted with a detour. The causeway, naturally, was not open to traffic since the aqueduct had not been formally dedicated and the irrigation system opened and made available to public use.

"James," said Jeff, "when this pail of water tumbles down into that valley, spread out where man wants it, that will be the richest agricultural valley in the country."

"That's right, Cash," said Jimmy, surveying the lake and the shore region in anticipation of his next move; "you'll be able to stick bedposts in the ground and grow maple beds."

Jimmy found a road which pointed with a hand-drawn sign to the main highway. They drove up through woods and clearings, past idle trucks and sandy patches, until they hit a stretch of road that was well paved. There they hit a series of bridges.

"Is this ground part of the dam?" Jeff asked.

"Sure," said Jimmy, "this ground is

all the bank of the river raised up to the level of the new lake. These bridges are like outlets, sluiceways where the overflow can run off."

"Where are the big gadgets, what do you call them, anyway? Faucets?"

"You can if you want to, I'll still call 'em sluiceways. Well, the main ones would be right on the dam proper. And then they'd have them at the power plant which must be alongside the mountains."

"Why? Is the pressure heaviest there?"

"When you create a thing like this, Mr. Gorman," said Jimmy, "the pressure is heaviest at your weakest spot, regardless of the natural help. Gravity is always on your side if you'll employ it."

"Thank you, professor," said Jeff. "I'll bear that in mind hereafter and will not go near open windows."

"Or open waterways like this thing," said Jimmy. "Here I ought to be out on the calm Pacific fishing innocent fishes out of the ocean. Instead I'm pushing a gasoline crate through the backwoods because you don't want to do anything the easy way. We could just as well have turned out of that airport and have been at that damn dam in twenty minutes up a six-lane concrete road. But no, you've got to do things the hard way. You've got to— Say what the hell is this?"

He stopped the car short.

They had come out of a thick, artificial wood of scrub pine. Ahead was a short clearing down a hill and at the bottom was a small iron bridge over a sluiceway under which was gushing water in a violent torrent.

"Jimmy," said Jeff, "this irrigation project must have a bootlegger around it somewhere."

But Ranger didn't hear him. He was out of the car and around the front into the woods at the right. The lake would be a few hundred feet down there. Since Jeff had no idea what Jimmy was looking for or why he bounded around like a jackrabbit, he sat composed and perfectly still in the car. Presently Jimmy returned and climbed into the seat. He shifted the car into speed and drove over the bridge. In a few seconds it seemed they were out on the State highway and that carried them around to the other side of the dam.

When they were on it, Ranger settled down. He couldn't withstand the suspense, though. He said: "Aren't you at all curious about that?"

"What?" asked Jeff. "I'm no engineer. What's playing, as you yourself are always asking me?"

"First," said Jimmy, "isn't this thing supposed to back up twenty-five miles?"

"That's my understanding," replied Jeff.

"It doesn't," said Jimmy. "And furthermore, didn't you tell me that irrigation doesn't become official for another month?"

"I did and now you'll tell me that somebody is bootlegging the water through."

"I'll do no such thing," replied Ranger. "Somebody is sluicing that water off. And that's why it isn't twenty-five miles long."

"Maybe they're expecting rain."

"Not at this season," said Ranger.

"No?" questioned Jeff.

"No," said Jimmy, "and this is the time of the year in this section when you conserve water and don't sluice it off over the side of a hill to keep it away from irrigation pipes."

"Your conclusion then, Sir James," said Jeff, with the needle in his voice, "is that there is something slightly awry with the dam. Is that right?"

"Something very screwy, to put it plainer," said Jimmy.

"Why, my friend," asked Jeff, "do you suppose I had you drive me out this way? To look at the scenery?"

"Nuts," said Jimmy. "What are you doing? Playing secrets or something? What's it all about?"

"That is what we are here for, James," said Jeff. "I fully expected to find something. Your sluice-gate business which, I must confess, would be slightly over my head, is a partial answer, let us say. Before we are on our way back to town we'll know an answer or two that will perhaps explain the extravagance with water."

THEY drove around and over another bridge which crossed the upper end of the lake.

"That looks very shallow to me," said Jimmy. "And it's no twenty-five miles from where that water ends up there down to that dam. This bridge isn't ten miles from that dam, and we can see the edge of the water up there." He pointed up the lake to the left.

It was true. Not more than two or three miles up the gorge the water's edge was visible. It wasn't difficult to pick it out in the late afternoon sun. The water was dark and ominous with the reflection of a darkening sky in it. The gorge that was dry was white and lonesome. It had the look and feel of the desert about it. The division was as plain as if you were standing right beside it.

They turned into the main highway off the bridge and swung down the six-lane road. That road held up right through to Santa Paula. But about seven miles down, they clocked it on the speedometer, they came to the mountain side of the dam and the road that would lead across it. Men were finishing work, putting up tools in a shed.

"Let's stop and see what we can see," said Jeff.

Jimmy pulled the car to a halt near the lake's edge in a small clearing back off the road. Across a small sluiceway bridge that connected with the main road there was a toolhouse or perhaps an office. Jeff couldn't make up his mind which. But evidently there was somebody official in it. He crossed the bridge to the house which was on a sort of cliff. A shingle jutted out from the door which read "Field Office." He went in. Fred Landry sat at one desk and another man across from him. Landry wore his hat and seemed on a visit more than a tour of inspection.

"Well, Mr. Gorman," he said, "out looking over our dam?"

"Not exactly," said Jeff. "Thought I'd drop around and see you. Looked for you in town; they told me you were out here."

"Yeah," said Landry, "that's funny; nobody knew I was coming out."

"O. K., Fred," said the other man, "I'll check those outlets and let you know in the morning; I've got to be getting to the other side."

He nodded to Jeff and crossed the room to the doorway and went out. Jeff sat down and looked a long time at Landry. The inspector of buildings looked long and silently at him. Finally Landry spoke.

"You're dissatisfied with my reasons for being in the Sentinel Building?" he asked, halfway between a statement of fact and a question.

"Honestly, Mr. Landry," said Jeff, "that doesn't concern me. But what does concern me is something which I think you know."

"If I can be of any help to you, I'll do

everything I can," said Landry. His voice was level and even, but under it there was a current of nervousness, tension.

"That's why I came out to talk with you," said Jeff. "I think there is a great deal of connection between the deaths of Crane and MacKenzie—" Jeff paused thoughtfully. "And somehow," he continued, "I suspect that connection has something to do with this irrigation project."

"What's your interest, Mr. Gorman?" asked Landry.

Jeff told him vaguely his position with the bank. And he concluded his revelation by stating that he was there more or less as a representative of the people down the valley who had invested their hard-earned money.

"I'm sort of their friend at court," continued Jeff, "and I'm not a very good, or helpful friend, because I don't seem able to put my finger on the reasons for any of the things which are going on."

"Why put your finger on it?" asked Landry. "You're standing on it!"

He spoke softly. So softly Jeff could hardly hear him; yet there was no escaping the emphasis he put on the statement. Then it *was* the dam! It was obvious that Jeff had picked his man, but, unfortunately, he had selected the wrong locale for a heart-to-heart talk.

"Can I drive you to town?" he asked.

"That wouldn't be too pleasant," said Landry. "I'm a married man, Mr. Gorman, with three children and a lovely wife."

Jeff pondered for a moment. Then he spoke.

"I'll take care of you," he said, almost inaudibly. "There will be no trouble, you can depend upon it. I'm driving into town. I'll go directly to my hotel. I'll wait for you. Somebody will call for you," he said, reaching into his pocket for a match; "when they come, go with them. Good-by."

Jeff rose and the soft-voiced conversation was over.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gorman," Landry said in a loud tone so the workman outside the office could hear, "but nobody is allowed over the dam now. Come back in the morning and I'll see what I can do to get you a permit."

"Thanks a lot for your courtesy, Mr. Landry," said Jeff. "I'll see you then."

Landry nodded knowingly and Jeff departed across the bridge to the mainland and the parking place where Jimmy was waiting. He got into the car and directed Jimmy to return to the hotel.

"What are you doing, Sherlock?" asked Jimmy, "playing cops and robbers?"

"As Sherlock would say, patience, Dr. Watson, patience," said Jeff. "Our quarry will be at the hotel in short order. A lady with green eyes will bring it to you, and then we must follow her through the jungle."

"Stop the melodrama, what gives?" asked Jimmy, swinging the car around and shifting into high. He instantly pumped the motor up to seventy and held it there. Jeff made no reply for a moment. He reached across the dash.

"Where do you keep the music?" he asked.

"Right here on the wheel," said Jimmy, turning on the radio. The button, lighted up a dial on the dash and Jeff jiggled it around until he got a dance band. The band was concluding a number and then the announcer said:

"This is KFI, Los Angeles."

"I'm still waiting, what gives?" asked Jimmy.

"What gives is this, James," said Cash. "MacKenzie held the key. What-

ever it is has something to do with this dam. He either told young Crane or he assumed he had enough money to stand a bribe—that is, a sort of a bribe. He was trying to peddle information which he had. Do not be surprised if half the people in Sentinel Square were there with the express idea of dealing Mr. MacKenzie a sudden dose of lead poisoning."

"But why?" asked Ranger.

"We will have the answer to that this evening. It is held, I believe, by Fred Landry. I came out here looking for him, because I assumed he'd be here. Rather I knew he'd be here if I were barking up the right tree. If I was not, it would make no difference. The important thing is that I'm on the right track."

The radio blared forth another dance number, the brass section rising to the pinnacle of screeching limits. Under the blaring band noise there became audible a rumble, like drums.

"Say," said Jeff, "that's an effective thing."

"What?"

"Those drums."

The rumble got louder and drowned out the music.

"Listen," said Jimmy, shutting off the radio switch, "that's not in the radio. That dam has given way. Let's get out of here!"

"We couldn't hear," said Jeff. "That damn band drowned out all noise except that rumble. Let's get up on the side of this hill."

"You're telling me," said Jimmy. "That wall of water and debris will be on our tails quicker than this thing can go. Watch for a road or a lane up the side of this hill."

"There's a turn right up there," said Jeff.

Jimmy slowed down the car. They came to a corner and he shifted the car into second speed and tore up the side of the mountain on a paved road.

The car groaned up and up until it came to a narrow macadam road which ran along the ridge. At the intersection there was a widening. Jimmy pulled the car into the side of the road and jumped out. From their vantage point they could see the valley below.

"Boy, we didn't get out of there any too quickly," said Cash.

He studied the scene in the clear light of the early-summer evening. Water was pouring through a large crevice on the side of the mountain, sections of the dam were crumbling before the angry rush of water and detonating through the hills with a rumbling, ominous sound. They were not more than four miles from the dam.

The water tore in an angry torrent down the gorge. A house just below them disappeared under the ten-foot high wave of water licking up the side of the mountain. The water recessed and was swallowed in the huge wall that splashed and slashed across the floor of the gorge across to the other side. Like an angry steed that had been corraled from its favorite pasture it dashed with terrifying speed across the plain to the opposite side, the side up which they had approached the dam from town.

"We can thank somebody that it held until we got out of that valley over there," said Jimmy.

"There you have a lesson in the longest way 'round being the shortest way home, James," said Jeff. "If we hadn't gone that way we would never have seen what we are looking at."

"When I think back at driving along that opposite ridge I shudder," said Jimmy.

Sections of the dam were crumbling before the angry rush of water and detonating through the hills with a rumbling, ominous sound.

"Why," exclaimed Cash, "that side is all right. The dam isn't holding over here on the main structure. The back-up seems to have put too much pressure on it. Let's get back there and look at it."

"Let's not and say we did," said Jimmy. "That place will be filled with rescue workers and inspectors from everywhere."

"And if there's anything wrong," said Jeff, "we'll be the last to hear about it. Let's get back to town."

They climbed into the car and Jimmy immediately switched on the radio. The dance band was still blaring. Jimmy tooled the car around the corner to the macadam road and shifted into high. The music was interrupted.

"We interrupted this program of dance music, ladies and gentlemen," said an announcer, "to bring a special news bulletin. Santa Paula. The Valle Grande Hydroelectric Irrigation Dam broke this evening. Further bulletins will follow. Thank you." The radio cut back to the dance music.

The road turned down toward the valley in a gradual descent. "This must be the old road into town from the moun-

tains," said Jimmy.

"I hope it doesn't join that main highway," said Jeff. "At least I hope it doesn't join it until we can get back to the city."

Jimmy zoomed the car around the tortuous mountain road. "We'll probably come right out and meet that flood face to face," he said.

"Flash," burst in an announcer on the radio. "Santa Paula. Flood waters from the Valle Grande Dam which broke some minutes ago, are rumbling across the Grande Gorge. A twenty-five-mile artificial lake is sweeping down the valley in a wall of water seventy-five feet high. Destruction and ruin are in the wake of this huge monster of unloosed water. The dam was constructed as an irrigation project. There are several defense plants in the valley. The number of dead and injured is unknown, but it is estimated that sixty million dollars will be lost."

"That's a lot of ungrown lettuce," said Jimmy. He swung the car around the

corner and almost ran into a State policeman whizzing around the road on a motorcycle heading toward the dam. Jimmy jammed his brakes to the floor. The policeman swung his wheel around in front of the car. He jumped off it and let it down on the road in front of the car. He walked around to Jimmy's side.

"You're in a hell of a hurry, mister," he said. "Where you going? And where've you been?"

"We were out at the dam, officer," said Jeff.

"Yeah," said the cop, "and what were you doing?"

Jeff was in quandary. He couldn't give Landry away. He hesitated just long enough.

"That answer's enough for me," the officer growled. He drew his gun out of its holster. "Get out, you, on the other side." Cash got out of the car. "Walk to the front of this thing and pick up that wheel and get it back here."

"Now listen, officer," insisted Cash, "I can explain this thing. We're here on business and I went out to see a man at the dam."

"O. K., mister," said the policeman, "if it's that easy let the sergeant turn you loose. Me, I'm taking you in. These sabotage guys are pretty smooth and for all I know you may be one. I'm taking no chances. Get that wheel back here."

Jeff picked up the motor bike and pushed it behind the car. The policeman ordered him to set it up on its rear rest and directed him how to start the motor. Satisfied that nothing had happened to the motorcycle the policeman ordered him to climb back into the automobile.

"Do you know where police headquarters is in Santa Paula?"

Jimmy nodded his head.

"Drive there," he said. "I'll be right behind you."

CHAPTER X.

JAILED!

"YOU'VE got to get out of this, Sherlock," said Jimmy. "I haven't got any answers."

"I don't want to get out for a time," said Jeff. "This may be a break. First I want to get hold of Martin Rossi. Have him fight to get us out. Get that G-man and quickly to the station house. You see him. Tell him to get out to that dam and find out what happened to Landry."

"Boy," said Jimmy, "that's right. Say the word and I'll give this copper the business and we can find out for ourselves."

"No," said Jeff.

The car pulled out into the main highway which was jammed with traffic. Ambulances and fire trucks screeched to and fro. The motorcycle policeman pulled up beside Jimmy. He ordered him into a gas station. There he went into a phone booth with both men in his sight.

"You don't mind me telephoning my lawyer, do you?" asked Jeff.

"When I telephone for the wagon you can do it," replied the policeman.

Jeff went into the booth and telephoned the Plandome. He got Rossi on the wire.

"Martin, you're hooked," he said. "The dam has gone. You knew that. All right, I'm pinched for mopery or something. Get a lawyer over to the jail as soon as you can with a writ to get Ranger and myself out. Meanwhile, get that Federal man, Falls. He's around town looking into a couple of murders.

Get him over to the jail to see me. I'll fill his hat for him. He'll have enough tricks to perform to keep him busy all night."

The policeman rapped on the door as Jeff hung up the phone. Ranger was behind him.

"Don't act like a schoolboy," said Jimmy, pressing close behind him, "or I'll make a bum out of you and take your gun right out of your holster."

The policeman knew he was in a bad way. Jimmy could shove him right into the booth with Cash and any threat of gunfire would be as bad for himself as for his captives.

"It's much better to be pleasant, officer," said Jeff. "It just happens that we are here on business. Important business. And you may not be exactly co-operative with this arrest. I've telephoned my lawyer to get a writ to get us out. Is that all right with you?"

"I told you to wait till I was out of that booth," said the cop.

"Listen," said Jeff, "you're arresting me on some count: of which I do not know. Arrest me also for using a telephone. What can I lose?"

The cop stepped back and appeared more agreeable for a moment. "All right," he said, "the patrol car will be here for you in a few minutes. They'll take you in. I'd lose you in this mess."

"We have seen this flood, officer," said Jeff, "and I might suggest that we may get caught in it."

"No, we won't," said the policeman, "the river turns down another gorge a mile up and it'll cut the worst of it away from the city. Them defense plants down below there'll get the worst. I suppose that was your idea."

"If you say so," said Jeff.

Two detectives jumped out of a squad car and rushed into the place. They were the men who had picked up Cash before.

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"Little Red Riding Hood," said one of them.

"What's the charge, officer?" said the detective. "The call said these guys was dangerous."

"I was answering a call to the dam," said the State policeman, "and not knowing how bad traffic would be on the highway I went up the ridge road. About seven miles out, not two miles from the dam, I came on these two guys tearing along the winding road a mile a minute. They almost ran me down. I figured they must be getting away from something, so I decides to take 'em in on suspicion. They said they come from the dam!"

"Well, well," said one detective, "will the captain be glad to see you! You always seem to turn up where there's action."

"Well, let's not keep the captain waiting," said Cash, "and button your lip, you look better with it closed."

He walked in front of the officer, who grabbed him by the lapel of the coat. With one sweep of his hand, Cash brushed the grip off. The officer lunged at him as did the other detective. Jimmy stepped in front of him.

"I wouldn't bother about this," said Jimmy to the detective, "because it might be messy and it wouldn't be nice to get shot in the belly with your own gun."

"What's this all about," yelled the State policeman, "subdue that guy." He started for Cash. Jimmy grabbed him.

"Listen, you meat head," said Jimmy, "you've dealt yourself a stacked deck already. This guy is the biggest financier in the West. You'll be back hoeing potatoes if you lay a finger on him—besides you'll have to kill me, if you do. Don't be a chump."

The cop stopped and Jeff walked deliberately out to the squad car and got into the back seat. There was a driver in the front. The detective he'd had the brush with got in beside him.

"Don't try to prove to me how tough you are in these close quarters," said Jeff, "because I know a trick or two and you might come off second best. You're a clumsy oaf, you know."

Jimmy was in the front and Cash between the other detectives in the rear. His erstwhile adversary was either afraid that Cash might make a fool of him or he was leery of what might develop. He said nothing after directing the driver to headquarters. The car swung into the stream of traffic and around it to the outside. The driver let go with his siren and they sped along the road on the wrong side, slithering in and out, as cars came at them from the direction of the city. The road was the picture of panic. Jeff was happy when they reached Grande Boulevard and swung over to a side street approaching the main part of the city.

They were taken directly to Captain Simmons' office. He was waiting for them. With him was an officer of the State police, whose prisoner he would be.

"Well," said Simmons, "we meet again. I told you a deck of cards. A stick of dynamite would have been the same."

"Oh," said Jeff, "so the dam was blown up!"

"News to you, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, it is," said Jeff. That was what he wanted to know. Was it dynamited or did it break? "Can I quote you, captain, at the proper time?"

The telephone on the captain's desk rang. He just picked up the receiver and apparently permitted the person on the other end to begin talking without

any sign from him that he was there. He listened absently, meanwhile staring at Jeff and then at Ranger.

"Perhaps later," he said into the phone. "Not right now."

Jeff assumed that it was the Federal man and that for the moment, anyway, Captain Simmons was permitting nobody to question him but himself. Jimmy was silently in the background. He said nothing and assumed a role as quietly out of sight of Cash as he could.

"What's the story?" asked Simmons.

"There's no story," said Jeff. "We were driving along a road and a policeman arrested us. Suppose you tell us what for?"

"Why were you on that road?" asked the State police officer.

"We'd left the dam which we went out to see," said Jeff. "We heard the rumble a few minutes after seven o'clock and since we had but recently driven around the lake we knew there was an awful lot of water there to be dumped down that valley. We wanted to get out of the way of it, that's all."

"We'd like to know what you were out at the dam for?" asked Simmons.

"I found what I was looking for," said Jeff.

"Suppose you tell us what it was," said Simmons, sarcastically.

"I will, willingly," said Jeff, "at the proper time. In the meanwhile, I think it would be well for you to tell me what this is all about."

"I'll tell you," said Simmons. "I'm going to hold you and your accomplice here on suspicion."

"Of what?" asked Ranger.

"Just suspicion," said Simmons. "That's enough. Maybe you had nothing to do with that dam blowing up—"

"That's the second time you've said that captain," put in Jeff; "what makes you so sure the dam blew up?"

"How else could a dam like that get loose?" asked Simmons evenly.

"I don't know," said Jeff. "Suppose you tell me. But we saw the early breaking up from the top of that hill a mile or so away from it." He knew it was three or four miles, but he shortened the distance to get the captain talking if he could.

"So," said Simmons, "you blew it up and then went up to watch it go."

"Lots of people saw us," replied Jeff. "We also saw lots of things; so, captain, if you'll simply book us we'll get right out of your hair. I refuse to answer any further questions until I consult my attorney."

"Have you got one here?"

"Mr. Rossi is attending to that," said Jeff.

Simmons pushed the button on his desk and a detective stuck his head in the door. "Tell that Federal man he can have these guys for ten minutes."

Falls walked in through the door. "If you don't mind, captain," he said, with even temper, "I'll talk with Mr. Gorman privately. Mind if I use your office?"

Simmons rose reluctantly and left the office. The State policeman followed him. Cash dropped into a chair beside the Federal man. "Find Millicent Crane," he said. "You haven't got a minute to lose. This thing is going to break wide open and somebody else is going to get hurt."

"Why?" asked Falls.

"That was not sabotage to injure any defense program," said Jeff.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Never mind," said Jeff, "I'll give you the dirt when you come back and tell me she's safe and tell me what happened to Landry. He's the public works

inspector or something, and we left him at the dam."

"Were you there?"

"Yes," replied Jeff, "and, accidentally, we drove completely around it. We discovered a wide open sluiceway on the other side of that dam which sent tons and tons of water cascading down the side of a watershed. It was routed up a gorge on the other side of the canyon. The lake that was supposed to back up twenty-five miles wasn't more than seven miles long."

"You think then that somebody blew up the dam?"

"I have only the word of Captain Simmons who seems to have a way of anticipating accidents," said Jeff.

"Did he say it?"

"Not only did he say it," put in Jimmy, "he insisted on it. Of course we blew it up to hear him—"

"But that's aside from the point," said Jeff. "The important thing now is that Millicent Crane can be a dangerous witness relating those things which her brother may have told her before he was killed. Somebody is responsible for this series of accidents and he is not going to stop now because she's a woman and a very pretty one, too. So get on your horse, Falls, and save the lady. Come back here and I'll bet I'll have the entire story for you. Just put me in jail and give me a chance to collect all the data around one thought—and that thought will be the person responsible for all this."

Falls departed. Simmons took Jeff and Jimmy downstairs and ordered the desk captain to lock them up until he heard from him. He said he'd present the charge directly.

"Say," said Jimmy, "we'll have company. Didn't they lock up that Donaldi the contractor, and somebody connected with the girl?"

The officer conducting them to the sumptuous quarters of the new headquarters jail was just ahead of him. There was a single cell block behind the squad room. These men were held for hearings and then removed from there to the county jails.

"Is Donaldi still here?" Jeff asked.

"Yeah," said the policeman, "is he a friend of yours?"

"No," said Jeff, "but since he built the dam and they think I blew it up, we might get acquainted."

"Well," said the cop, "I'll put you across from him. The damn murderer. Do him good to look at you."

"Fancy that," said Jimmy.

CHAPTER XI.

DONALDI CRACKS.

THE turnkey locked Jeff into a cell opposite Vince Donaldi. Jimmy was in one next to Donaldi. The doors banged shut and clicked locked under a master electric switch at the end of the corridor and Jeff removed his coat and waistcoat to make himself comfortable.

"James," he called, "too bad we didn't bring in that radio from the car, then we could keep track of things."

"You can have my share," said Ranger.

"You mean, Jimmy," said Jeff, "that impending doom frightens you?"

"Doom?"

"Yeah, doom," said Jeff. "You don't think for one minute that water is going to turn away from here because you are in the jail; or do you? Jimmy," he went on, "when that wall of water hits this cheese box it'll fold up like a pile of sand in a hard running surf."

"Good lord," said Jimmy, "we got to

get out of here. We'll be killed, drowned like rats in a trap. They certainly want to get rid of us in a bad way to drown us in jail."

Donaldi came from the cot on which he was lying to the cell door. He peered through the dim lighted aisle at Jeff.

"Hello, Donaldi," Jeff said. "That's right, you were pinched, weren't you? Forgot about it. Well, Donaldi, if you are the one who done in MacKenzie you won't have to wait long for justice to catch up to you."

"Whatcha mean?" asked Donaldi. "And who done anybody in?"

"Why aren't you out of jail? Didn't they book you for the murder?" asked Jeff.

"They booked the wrong guy," said Donaldi, "but not by much. I had most all I could stand of that MacKenzie. He was a snake in the grass. He played both ends against the other end."

He paused. "Whatcha mean justice is catching up to me?" he asked.

"Well," said Jeff, "that thing you built up the river and called a dam, isn't."

"Whatcha mean, it isn't?"

"Just that, Donaldi," said Jeff smoothly. "Your little project has gone with the water, blown up or cracked up or something. And—"

Donaldi grabbed the bars. "You mean," he said, "they have blown up the dam!"

"I don't know whether 'they' did it," replied Jeff, "but I assure you in all sincerity, and as an eyewitness at some distance, that every drop of water in that lake will be cascading down this valley within twenty minutes—yes, it may be coming now. It was tearing at the dam and causing a bigger break with every second when I saw it. A tremendous wall of water coming down the valley, not a quarter of an hour back of us. And we could see it growing as one section of the dam after another folded."

Donaldi stared blindly.

"It'll wipe this city off the map. It'll be the worst flood in years. And Mayor Kobb will have his way," Jeff went on.

"Whatcha mean?"

"Well, I'm in his way," said Jeff. "I know a thing or two which would be very embarrassing for the mayor. So his stooge, Captain Simmons, had me and my associate arrested for complicity in the wrecking of the dam. A very simple device for getting rid of a troublesome enemy. The only trouble with it, Donaldi, is that this dam is really cracking up, something I don't believe even you expected. That means that this jail, right on the main drag that ends in the turn of the river, will really be jarred. We'll be drowned—"

"Like rats in a trap," yelled Donaldi.

"Save your breath, Donaldi," said Jimmy. "You'll need it when the water starts coming through that window. You'll last maybe a day or two if you float on your back with your nose against the ceiling. Won't get that high, I hope. I'm counting on it."

"Unless," put in Jeff, "this building is built of the same stuff that Donaldi's dam was. Then it'll go fast. Like blowing over a match box. Suspect it's pretty fragile. Mayor Kobb has a way of building things on sandy foundations."

"So," yelled Donaldi, "you know. You know. Well, that rat ain't going to drown me like a rat. Him and his talk!"

"What'd he do, Donaldi?" asked Jeff. "Talk you into taking the rap? You're a sucker. Get those things off your chest."

"Get what off my chest?" yelled Donaldi. He was still screaming and waving his arms. "I ain't done nothing.

Those guys cleaned up on that real estate and they left me holding the bag. That damn MacKenzie had a lot of phony ideas about that dam and he must have scared somebody. I told the mayor that dam would hold. Just needed a little fixing. That dam blew up. Well," he laughed hysterically, "they got you too, sucker, so don't feel sorry for me."

"I'm feeling sorry only for myself," said Jeff, "because you know as well as I do that I had nothing to do with blowing up that dam."

"Certainly I know," replied Donaldi. "Only one man would do that. He's got enough nerve to blow up the State capital if he thought it would remove any evidence against him."

"But, Donaldi, you and I know too much, that's our crime. So we drown. Well, it was a good life while it lasted."

"Yeah, and there's going to be more of it. I'll yell it out the windows to the world. They can't get rid of me like this. I'll write it out."

"I'll help you," said Jeff. "I've got a pen and some paper."

"Don't bother, those dirty double-crossers. Well, I did sand the dam. So what? It was sound and safe."

"You were letting off water to relieve the weight, weren't you Donaldi?"

"Sure, that was Landry. He's a wise cookie, too wise for his own good now. He'll get it!"

"I'm afraid he got it, Donaldi. He was the last man at the dam. He was killed in the first break."

"Sure, that dam held thousands of tons more than that for a week. We had it full up. There was some seepage, but we sluiced off millions of gallons of water and relieved it plenty and we were still doing it. I told the mayor that we could fix it up. But no, he has to go and blow it up!"

"Bear that in mind, Donaldi, if we do happen to escape from this trap," said Jeff, "because come what may, your number is up. They've got you for that MacKenzie murder and you'll never beat it, if they have to put your fingerprints on the murder gun."

"My gun didn't kill him," yelled Donaldi.

"Your friend, the mayor," said Jeff, "I think will take care of that."

The door to the squad room opened and a sergeant came through with the jailer. They approached Jeff's cell and opened it after the turnkey had released the master lock. They opened Jimmy's and ordered them to the office.

"Let me out of here," yelled Donaldi. "You can't let me drown. Don't let me drown in here!"

"You ought to, Donaldi," said the sergeant, "but the worst of the flood is over. Some parts of that paper dam of yours is holding."

Donaldi looked at Jeff. His anger rose like a black cloud blotting out the night. "You dirty stool pigeon," he screamed. "I'll get you for this. You stinker—"

"Forget it, Donaldi," said Jeff, "and maybe you'll save your worthless neck."

"What's up, officer?" asked Jimmy.

"Some guy's out here with a writ, one of them lawyers that would serve anything—and for a dynamiter. You birds certainly must have plenty of sugar to spread it around for miracles like that to happen. In this town especially."

"Lots of things will happen in this town, sergeant. You'll be a very busy man before this night is over. So don't close early, and sweep out your best cells, you're going to have some important customers."

Rossi was in the squad room with a lawyer. The lawyer, an important bar-

rister in the county, had managed to get a writ signed by a justice he knew.

"Let's go," replied Jeff. As he started across the room toward the door, Simmons picked up a phone. Jeff called back: "Give the mayor my regards and tell him he'll be hearing from me—soon!"

Simmons only stared at him.

CHAPTER XII.

KOBB CORNERED.

OUTSIDE the station house, Jeff demanded of Rossi news of the G-man's operations.

"He's out at a hospital set up in the field trying to locate somebody. Millicent is with him," replied the banker.

"Fine, Martin," said Jeff; "you go back to the hotel and get yourself a bodyguard. We'll have some company calling there and I hope you can detain them until Ranger and I get back. We may have more work than you'll have."

Ranger reclaimed a cab that was standing idly by the curb outside the station house and they drove to the gas station where they'd left their car. They got the car and drove cautiously up the ridge road to the field hospital which was set up in a large tool storage house on the hill overlooking the dam.

They found Falls and Millicent bending over Landry. He was bandaged from head to foot like a mummy. His eyes found Jeff and then they closed. Falls got off his knee.

"He isn't dead," he said; "he's badly battered and shocked, but they say he'll pull through. He was awfully worried when he found out you were arrested. Evidently he was just keeping himself conscious in the hope he'd find his voice to clear you. He'll come around."

"Yes," said Jeff, "but it may be days."

"Or weeks," said a doctor. "We are moving him to the hospital at once. He

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has compound fractures of the legs and arms and his chest may be damaged. We hope not. There's little chance for him if it is."

"We can't do anything, doctor?" asked Jeff. "Can we drive him to the hospital?"

"There will be more comfort in an ambulance. Call the hospital tomorrow. We'll know then."

Millicent got up and faced Jeff.

"What is this terrible thing all about?" she asked.

"Perhaps," said Jeff, "you can help us find out."

"I'll do anything I can to help," she said. They were out of the shack and walked over to the car the G-man had commandeered for his own operations.

"One thing is sure, Gorman," Falls said. "There is a connection between the murders."

"Anything new?" asked Jeff.

"MacKenzie chartered a plane and a car. He was at Palm Springs the night of the crash. I thought perhaps you knew," he said speculatively.

"No, he didn't see me—socially, that is," said Cash, "but I think I knew who he did see."

"Mayor Kobb?"

"Possibly. There was Rossi, too. He might have come to see him. Millicent, do you know of any connection between Rossi and MacKenzie?"

"None except that Gordon was very certain of himself when he spoke to Mr. Rossi over the telephone."

"Had Rossi agreed to meet your brother?" the G-man asked.

"I guess he had," she replied. "I do not know."

"Tell me, Millicent," said Cash, "what about MacKenzie? You really disliked him, while pretending otherwise. Why?"

"My father," she said flatly.

"But he was with your father right until the time of—"

"Of the swindle by which he lost the paper, say it, that's what it was. And one of the main springs was MacKenzie. Somewhere he got hold of the information that father was really bad off one time, a year or so before father lost the paper. He'd covered politics or something, I guess. Naturally, I don't know much about the details; I was away at school.

"When he discovered father was badly in need of money he offered to loan him some. Father never knew that he had money. He said he had a legacy in San Francisco from which he could draw limited amounts of capital and he had always wanted to get a foothold in the newspaper business and especially in Santa Paula."

"We've checked everything on him from his birth. There is no sign of a legacy anywhere that I recall," offered Falls.

"You'll find it was a legacy much like the one that caused his death, I'm afraid," said Jeff.

"You may be right," said Millicent, "for after father lost the paper, MacKenzie turned out to be the pipe line, shall we say, of the man who stole the paper from father."

"That," said Jeff, "is the missing link in this puzzle. If you can't figure it out, Falls, I think I can. Give me a half hour alone and I'll tell everything I know and suspect in this whole thing. You'll have plenty of action then."

"Well," said Falls, "it isn't strictly according to—"

"I haven't given you a bad steer yet, have I? This is the last one. Moreover, if everything I suspect is half true, you can make some arrests tonight," Jeff said.

"Where will you be?" asked Falls.

"At police headquarters thirty minutes after we get to the city, I hope," replied Jeff. Then he reflected. "That's bad. Better make it Millicent's home. Give us half an hour start from here; or, better still, you go there and wait one hour. If we are not there, come to the hotel."

"O. K.," said Falls, "but we'll wait in a car outside the hotel. When the half hour is up we'll join the party. That's the best I can do."

"Good enough. Step on it, James," said Cash.

They drove along for five minutes doing seventy-five. The road was pretty well cleared off, except for trucks and ambulances going out toward the dam. Soon a siren sounded behind them.

"Here comes our friend again," said Jimmy, peeping in the mirror.

"Let's make friends," said Cash. "Can he catch us?"

"Not a chance," said Jimmy.

"Let 'er rip," said Jeff. "Only be certain of your ground, because we can use this fellow in our business later."

Jimmy drove harder and harder. "Our friend," he said, looking in the mirror, "has company. We'll wind up with the whole force on our tail."

"We may need them!"

They came to the city and Jimmy sped over the streets as fast as he could without attracting undue attention. He watched the motorcycles, three of them now several blocks to the rear in the mirror. "They're gaining," he said.

"Step on it," said Jeff. "We've got to make that hotel. If we do, this is perfect."

"There's another," said Jimmy, nodding ahead of him. A policeman on a motorcycle driving out of the street switched his headlight at them.

"Slow down," said Jeff. "And when he is stopped, give her the gun. The more the merrier. Look at the road. I'll watch behind."

The car slowed down noticeably and the light on the officer's cycle ahead wobbled indicating that he was thinking of getting off. At least he was stopped. Jimmy was three hundred feet from him. He stepped hard on the gas and almost flew by the halted motorcycle as the rider attempted to turn around and gain speed all in one motion.

The other cycles were gaining. Jimmy had a great start and he charged the car to its limit for the last block to the hotel. They parked in front of the hotel and leaped out.

"Police will be here, lots of 'em," yelled Jeff. "Tell 'em we went in here."

They bolted into the lobby and were in an elevator going to the seventh floor before the police got to the hotel.

"Tell those cops," said Cash, giving the boy a ten-dollar bill, "that we're desperate, you took us to the seventh. Now let us off at eleven."

Jeff ran down the corridor to the room. Then, as he turned the corner, he stopped and walked toward the door.

"May I ask what the hell this is all about?" asked Jimmy.

"You'll see," said Jeff, "see there now. We do have company." One of the detectives who always seemed to be around stood in front of the door.

"Let him have it at the first opportunity," Jeff whispered.

The man blocked the corridor. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Out the window," replied Jeff, raising his left out in front of him. The man drew back and Jimmy caught him flush on the side of the jaw with a haymaker. The detective sagged to the floor.

"This is interesting work," said Jimmy.

"There may be firearms," said Jeff. "Don't punch too freely."

Jeff leaned against the door and it opened.

"Get out, Sweeney," said Simmons. "Oh. It's you. Fancy."

"Yes," said Jeff, "but I was expecting somebody else. Oh, there you are. How are you, Mayor Kobb?" Kobb was behind the door which Cash had opened. He stepped forward and grabbed Jeff. And pulled back his fist.

"I wouldn't do that, mayor," said Jimmy, restraining him. "You'll get hurt."

"Get back, you pig," snapped Simmons. Jimmy turned and faced a gun.

"Don't you fire that thing," said Jeff, at the same time leaping across the room and hitting the gun into the air. Simmons swung at his head and missed and Jimmy grabbed Simmons. Mayor Kobb was into the melee with both fists flying. "This is great, mayor," said Cash, "when the cops get here they'll have you redhanded."

Kobb stopped short. "John," he commanded. Simmons stopped. "What do you mean, cops?"

"The game is up, your honor," said Jeff, "the Federal government has complete facts on you. That hall out there is filled with policemen at this very minute. And, with foresight of which I'm pardonably proud, you'll find only one or two of your hired thugs among them. Most of them are State policemen, who I understand are not happy with you at all."

Kobb was not easily deceived. He stepped toward the door beyond Jeff and Cash crossed the room, standing between Rossi, who was seated in an overstuffed chair looking very much like an overstuffed picture of a scared bank teller, and Simmons. Then he beckoned to Jimmy with his eyes, rolling them toward Simmons. Jimmy walked toward him quickly. "Block him out tackle," hissed Jeff.

"What's going on?" demanded Simmons, his gun dangling from his hand, which he was trying to stuff into his coat pocket. "Get back there."

Jimmy shoulder-blocked him in the best approved football manner and Jeff reached for Rossi, grabbing him by the wrist and yanking him into the next room. Before Simmons could regain his balance, Jimmy had slammed the door in his face. Kobb had opened the door into the hall. In the doorway stood Special Agent Falls and Millicent Crane.

"Open that door or I'll shoot!" said Simmons, unmindful of the presence of the agent.

"I wouldn't do that!" said Falls, walking into the room.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Kobb. "And who the hell are you?"

"I'm a special agent from the department of justice," said Falls. "Who's in that room?"

"I'm here, Cash Gorman," Cash yelled through the door. "You're early. If you'll entertain the gentlemen for our agreed period of time, I will keep my promise."

"O. K., Gorman," said Falls. "Be seated, gentlemen, and act like grown men."

"I'm leaving," said Kobb.

"Don't let him go," yelled Cash, who was listening.

"I wouldn't, Mr. Mayor," said Falls; "you see, Mr. Gorman is a desperate character."

"Why don't you arrest him?" asked the mayor sarcastically.

"Well," replied Falls, "it's like this: Somehow, the State police believe he's broken out of jail. And with your captain there not at police headquarters a very strange thing has happened. The State police have enlisted the aid of your cops. The place is surrounded, top, bottom and underside. They'll be looking for everybody who comes out of this room, or some room above or below it. If I were you, I'd sit tight until Gorman gets finished. It may be nothing."

"John," said Kobb, "open that door."

"If you do, Captain Simmons," said Falls, "I'll shoot you through the middle." Before Simmons realized it, he was looking at the unaccustomed end of a gun. "Gentlemen, be seated."

"Great work, Falls," yelled Cash. "I can now do my work undisturbed and in peace."

Cash turned to Martin Rossi. The little banker was chalk-white. Fear was written in every feature of his face. Jimmy handed him a glass of brandy. He downed it in one swallow.

"Start talking, Martin," said Jeff, and sat down.

CHAPTER XIII.

ROSSI TALKS.

ROSSI started to talk, hesitantly, haltingly. "Cash," he said, "I don't know where to start. This thing is the worst mess I've ever gotten into. I wish I'd let that fool print it in the beginning."

"So you were the missing witness?" asked Ranger.

"You knew?" said Rossi, surprised.

"Well," said Jeff, "we figured there was some connection between you and MacKenzie which was not exactly on the level. We searched the files and found something interesting a few months before he took an active interest in the management of the paper.

"You should always remember, Martin," continued Cash, "the words of the President: 'There is nothing to fear except fear itself.'"

"Cash," said Rossi, "I was very foolish. MacKenzie built that one error into a mountain and—well, he didn't make me pay. I can't say that."

"But he used you, that's it, isn't it?"

"Just about." Rossi wiped his brow with a handkerchief, and Jeff glanced at his watch.

"Talk fast, Martin; we've got to get

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out of here. You're going to have to act better than you've ever acted before. But get on with your story."

"Just about eight years ago MacKenzie made his first demand on me," said Rossi. "It was prohibition times when I first met him. I was in a speakeasy where a man was shot. It would have hurt me at the bank and somebody helped me get out of the place. The girl I was with was injured in the mix-up. I got away and became the mysterious witness. The girl lived for several years. MacKenzie was in that speakeasy that night and saw me. He remembered me later.

"Well, about six years ago that murder came to a head again. The police searched, as police will, and they solved the case. They had the man. All they needed was the mysterious witness to make their case ironclad. The State's attorney presented a very fine case when one day I got a call from a sanitarium just outside of Santa Paula. It was from that girl. She was badly off. This girl wasn't a bad girl. She just played around with a fast crowd and it got to her lungs.

"She told me that she had been befriended by a newspaper reporter in Santa Paula and had talked to him many times during the seven or eight months she had been there. And then one day after she had told him about the murder and the whys and wherefores of it—during which time she told him, secretly, of course, that I was her escort—the Santa Paula *Sentinel* broke the story of this murder in the Bay district, miles and miles out of its territory.

"The story did not reveal my identity. It spoke of a person who escorted one of the 'gun molls,' I think it said, disappearing. If that man could come forward, he could bring the culprits to justice. She told me that MacKenzie knew I was the missing witness. Furthermore she had sworn him to positive secrecy in the entire story, but he had failed to keep his promise. And after he printed the story he refused to come to see her. That was why she had sent for me."

Rossi took another drink. He was getting something off his mind. You could see the load lifting from the man.

"Nice fellow," said Jimmy.

"You know," Rossi continued, "where I was in the bank six or seven years ago. A story of that sort would have made my position untenable. I would have been through and with my whole career still in front of me."

"I can understand," said Cash. "We've all made mistakes, Martin. And I rather figured that yours would be playing an important part in this little drama."

"MacKenzie was really a wily operator," Rossi said. "He never telephoned me. Never wrote me or anything. The trial dragged on for days and days. Sometimes it looked great for the prosecutor. Then the defense attorney would tie up a witness in important testimony and fix it so that the jury's mind would be left open until a collaborating witness might be produced. Naturally, I always saw that witness as myself. In truth, there were seven or eight missing witnesses. People who'd died, or whom they'd lost track of.

"But those are the things you never think of when you can put yourself into every mysterious role. MacKenzie picked his spot. One day a deposition was introduced from a person too sick to appear. Naturally, I assumed it was the girl. I was reading about it in a paper at the bank, when my secretary announced there was a 'Mr. MacKenzie'

to see me. Well, I was frightened to the point of paralyzing fear. He stood in the doorway, his face redder than I ever saw it afterward. The veins of his neck bulged and his hair seemed on fire. He was the picture of a ruthless man. Afterward, long afterward when I'd come to know him, I remembered that face and came to know it was a certain sign he'd been drinking. He was really a physical coward and drank to bolster his nerve."

"But once he got talking he needed no help," offered Cash.

"His story was simple. He said he'd been in Santa Paula for several years and liked it. He knew the town and knew that the *Sentinel* could be an excellent newspaper property. He felt that he could help it. But he wasn't going to help it unless he got something out of it and he said he could get something out of it by buying a small share of the paper. He thought he could get as much as twenty-five percent of the paper for as little as thirty or forty thousand dollars. And he thought a banker would be the man to come to see.

"On that I can recall his exact words," said Rossi, taking another drink. "He said, 'Naturally, when a fellow needs money he goes to a bank. And if he can find a friendly banker, naturally he goes to him.' You'll see there was no direct threat of exposure. But I wanted it out. 'Why,' I asked him, 'do you think I'd be friendly?' 'Because you are a rising young banker with a happy life ahead of you,' he said. And then he told me he'd be expecting me out to Santa Paula on Saturday to inspect the plant."

"And like a fool," said Cash, "you went."

"Yes, I went," said Rossi, "and I carried thirty thousand dollars in cash."

"Did he ever put the pressure on you again?"

"Well, not pressure exactly. It would be like Crane's stunt."

"What was that?"

"Crane said to me, when he asked me for the money to help him with the paper, that MacKenzie said to tell me he was all for it. Not a direct threat as you can see. But enough to make me look into things. I will say that when I looked into things, we most always got our money's worth."

"What worried you this time? Well, never mind that. What was stolen from your room at Palm Springs?"

"I've told you before, Cash, nothing. I can't recall a thing."

"Come, Martin, come. Tell all. I was in that room." Cash related his encounter and bump on the head and his sight of the retreating back and a large, square package in his assailant's hand.

"Cash," Rossi said, "there was something stolen. I must have forgotten I had them. Crane told me to bring a blueprint of the dam. That's what was stolen."

"So, you knew about the dam," Jeff suggested.

"No, I didn't. Now I presume that was what Crane was going to tell me about. Only how we were going to save our money, I can't see."

"No time for that now. I'll show you later. By the way, Jimmy, check with Jack Connolly right now, will you? I asked him to look up something for me."

Ranger picked up the phone and placed a call for New York.

"What did Kobb have to say to you at Palm Springs?" asked Jeff.

Rossi was astonished.

"How did you know?"

"A note from him to you got me that boil," said Cash, rubbing his head where

a small piece of adhesive still was stuck.

"He told me not to get out of Valle Grande, that everything would be all right and not to believe half of the things MacKenzie told me. He said he would take care of MacKenzie and give him what he wanted."

"He said nothing else?"

"That's all," said Rossi.

Ranger said Connolly was on the phone. Cash took it and said:

"Tell it to Ranger, Jack; he'll tell me. I'm very busy." He handed the telephone to Jimmy, who listened intently. Cash grabbed a cord off his bathrobe and grabbed Rossi's hands behind him on a chair. He tied the banker's hands behind the chair and whipped his handkerchief out of his breast pocket.

"There's no pain here, Martin," said Jeff; "you've simply got to act. James and I will hide in this room. Then yell. Here, wet this handkerchief in your mouth. He placed the cloth to Rossi's mouth. "Tell me, Martin," he asked, "do you think anybody else was in this real-estate deal on as big a scale as the mayor?"

"I don't know that Kobb was in it," said Rossi, "but if he was, our information might lead us to believe that Maele, the *Sentinel* publisher, would be in it, too."

"Fine," said Jeff, "when I tell you, yell like anything, with the gag in your mouth, of course. Chew it." He tied the gag, and Rossi started to chew. "Tell them we got out the fire escape." Jeff went behind Rossi to the window and beckoned Jimmy to the table. Jimmy climbed under it and disappeared. It was a heavy leaf affair with the side hanging down. Cash jumped to the window sill and looked out. To his surprise there was no one below. It was a long, heavily draped window. He got himself tucked into the ruffle of the drape and lifted himself to the heavy steel cross bar. He whistled softly and Rossi yelled.

Falls, Kobb, Simmons and the girl burst through from the next room almost in one piece.

"Where are they?" demanded Kobb. Falls untied Rossi's gag and folded it into his hand.

"They went out the window," Rossi gasped.

Kobb rushed to the window and peered through the darkness. Simmons was after him.

"Downstairs, John; we've got to get those fellows," said Kobb. He started for the door with Simmons after him. They opened it and ran down the hall toward the elevator. Falls didn't move. He went on untying Rossi.

"See if they're gone," he said to Millicent. "Don't stick your head out, though."

She went to the door. "They've gone in an elevator," she said and turned to the room. "What do we do?"

"Wait'll that fool Gorman gets through hanging. Come on out, wherever you are. One of you is in that curtain," said Falls.

"That would be me," said Jeff. "All right, Jimmy. What did Connolly say?"

"He said," said Jimmy, falling to the floor from under the heavy table, "that Maele never had a quarter until he hit this town. He has a record for wreckage in the newspaper field that would match all the crackpot editors ever thought up in Hollywood. The Midas touch escaped him until the sun of Valle Grande softened him up."

Jimmy was up. So was Rossi.

"There is just one piece of evidence, colonel," Cash said to Falls, "but to get it how in the name of blazes are we going to get out of here alive?"

"I'll tell you," said Falls. "Come with me."

"We must give your friends a start," said Falls. "Tell me, Gorman, where have you a mind to find this missing piece of evidence?"

"I thought," said Jeff, "we might find where Maele got this sudden golden touch simply by asking him."

"Under given circumstances, you might be right," said Falls. He glanced at his watch. "By the time we get out of this place, it ought to be just about the right time. Rossi, you stay here. There'll be a caller, no doubt, in a few minutes. Keep him entertained if he gets restless. Don't let him frighten you."

Rossi looked aghast, but before he could reply, the efficient F. B. I. man was rushing the party down the corridor toward a service elevator. They were let out in a service room that led to an alley. Falls had a car parked in the alley. He got behind the wheel, ushering Millicent and Jimmy into the rear seat and directing Jeff to the seat beside him.

"I hope this works," said Jeff.

"It will," replied Falls, as he tooled the car around a corner toward the street. At the same time a blast of a siren wailed from under the hood.

"Music!" said Jeff.

"That will get us right out of this place without any questions," said Falls. "Some of your friends might not like your face, Cash."

"This is such a busy town," said Jeff, as Falls steered the car through the cordon of police. And while the siren screamed, the police obligingly cleared the way.

"Have you any idea," asked Jeff, "who this Maele might have been acting for?"

"I think you'll get the answer to that when we reach his house. He'll probably be entertaining," Falls answered. "There's one thing to remember, Cash, and that is that misfeasance, murder, obstructing justice and like crimes are difficult to prove, especially on a man with Kobb's touch of power."

"But there's one thing we can find, with the proper witnesses," Jeff suggested.

"In this little plot," Falls fitted in, "we might find some misuse of money that Kobb didn't control. Federal funds. And there is always a chance of having money and investing it without having reported the money in the first place."

"I'll bear those things in mind," said Jeff. "But this may not turn out so nice for you if this doesn't add up."

"I think it will," Falls replied. "Only you can do it, I can't. Maele is the key to the whole situation. By this time he is so scared, he'll be afraid of the sight of a Federal building, not to mention a G-man. But you came here to make money."

"Well, I hope it isn't all wiped out," said Jeff.

"A humorist," supplied Jimmy.

"Wait," called Millicent, as Falls stopped the car.

"There's the house," he said, "and I think you are likely to find him in that lighted room. Have a go at him. Hurry! I'll get whatever Miss Crane has to say."

Cash and Jimmy got out of the car. Stealthily they crossed the lawn to Maele's house. Like an animal, Jeff suddenly stopped and grabbed Ranger's arm. There was more than one man in the room with Maele. Maele was plainly visible from the lawn. The huge figure pacing back and forth across the floor could be but one man. Kobb!

Jeff led the way up the porch and

softly crawled toward the window. "Let's listen," he whispered to Ranger. They could hear Kobb's voice rising in a shrill, vicious shriek.

Macle was walking the floor, too. Kobb was waving his powerful arms for emphasis. "Double-crossing rat. You skunk. Run out on me, will you? . . . I'll take no raps—" The words came in torrents. Only the expletives were coherent.

"You boys looking for something?" a voice behind them asked.

"Get up and don't move a muscle or you're a dead duck!" It was undeniably Captain Simmons.

"My old friend, the captain," said Jeff. "Tell me, captain, why is it that you always are around ahead of trouble." Jeff made no effort to rise. He was on all fours. Jimmy followed suit.

"Get up," commanded Simmons, "or I'll blow you apart for robbery."

Jeff knew that it would be a perfect alibi. He got to his feet. But Jimmy stayed down. Jeff dusted himself off. "Up you," said Simmons, kicking at Jimmy. Before he knew what hit him, he was over the rail with Jeff on top of him and Jimmy on top of both of them. Jeff batted Simmons' gun and it fell to the porch. He held Simmons' mouth.

"But gently," said Jeff, "not too painfully, James."

"This is recommended for insomnia, captain." Jimmy blasted Simmons on the chin.

"I like this part of the job, Cash. Let's do some more," said Jimmy.

"That'll do nicely," said a voice above them in the bushes. "Gag him and put these on him." A pair of handcuffs landed beside Jimmy. "For the sake of Jehoshaphat, be quiet." Cash bent Simmons' arms behind his back and clamped the cuffs on him. The voice was that of Agent Falls. "Get up there and listen," he commanded.

They went back to the porch, fairly certain that Mayor Kobb had no other bodyguard. They stood up now between the windows and listened to the argument going on inside. From it, Cash got many fill-ins.

"Remember this," he heard Kobb say, "you leave here and you're done. Understand? Done! I don't mean half done. I mean stiff. Now don't forget it. This'll blow over and everything will be all right. That Gorman hasn't got a prayer and we'll get him before morning. Only don't you make an attempt to leave this house. Tax evasion is all they can get, and you are not going to help, understand?"

Jeff knew that would be the sign that Kobb would be leaving. He felt, too, that he would not light the porch lights, probably would steal out through a side door.

"Get down the side of the house," said Cash, to Jimmy. "Fall in behind him, only don't let him get to the sidewalk. Let him have it, just for fun. See if Falls turns up with another pair of cuffs."

Jimmy hopped down the steps to the corner of the house. Cash could see the large, angular figure of the mayor sweep by the house, his hands plunged deeply into his pockets. They went about fifty feet over the long sweep to the sidewalk when they suddenly stopped. Then Cash could hear a thud and there was only one figure. Jimmy was back on the porch stealthily in a few minutes.

"That agent will run out of handcuffs," said Jimmy. "What's up now?"

"We'll scare hell out of this guy," said Cash. "Stand behind that window over there and when he opens this one, start rapping on it like I do."

Cash rapped on a bay window. He could see Maele stop, startled. He tapped lightly again. Maele walked over to the window and Cash stood in it. He opened it. Cash stepped aside out of the light. Jimmy tapped on the other. Before he thought much about it Maele turned toward the other window and Cash jumped through.

"I just wanted to prove to you," said Jeff at Maele's back, as he wheeled with a gun in his hand, "that you are stupid. Put away the artillery. We never use it. Besides, my friend beyond you has very itchy knuckles. He's been practicing on your lawn. Stop the heroics or he'll stiffen you with his little finger."

Jimmy jabbed him in the back with his fist and Cash grabbed the gun. "That's better. We can talk with more freedom," said Gorman.

"What do you want? Get out of here," demanded Maele.

"Look, we haven't got much time," said Jeff. "How about coming clean and saving your own hide? Believe me I'm not going to jail for anything, because I have a stand-in—so has Ranger."

"I imagine," said Maele.

"Friend of yours, too," said Cash. "He just left here, as a matter of fact."

"Mayor Kobb!"

"None other. Might like to know who is standing in for my associate. Another friend of yours. Donaldi!"

"He killed MacKenzie!"

"You know damn well he didn't," said Jeff. "I might tell you that it won't go too well with you with my friend Falls unless you begin singing. Falls is the F. B. I. man. He's taken a sudden interest in income taxes. How can a fellow making about twelve thousand five hundred dollars invest upward of sixty thousand in speculative real estate ventures in twenty-four months? Interesting study, he finds."

"If you're talking about me," said Maele, "save your breath. I've worked hard all my life—"

"And save yours," interrupted Cash, "because you've never made a dime. In fact, you're never held a job successfully as a newspaper executive until you came here. And this little scene just played out here—of which a word-by-word record has been taken—incidentally—leads me to suspect the cause for your sudden success after a lifetime of failure."

"Gorman," said Maele, "you're a liar."

"Funny thing about these thieves," said Jimmy, "they all think we are lying when we find them out. Mayor Kobb said the same thing."

"Didn't the mayor tell you if you left that you would be a dead pigeon?" Cash said it leadingly, as if there was lots more of it, and that he knew it all.

"There's no use being a chump," said Jeff; "you sing and there'll be less grief for you."

Maele sat down. He put his head in his hands.

"Sure, sure, I'll talk," he said.

"First," said Jeff, "you'll need a defense fund. How about that other parcel of ten thousand acres offered in New York; that yours, too?"

"Yes," said Maele, not raising his head.

"I'll give you what you paid for it," said Jeff; "here's a thousand-dollar binder. Draw it up, James."

Jimmy went to a writing desk and scribbled.

"How did you get into it?" Jeff pressed.

"Kobb brought me here. He financed the purchase of the paper. I slugged

him to make it look good because he was going to make those reforms, anyway. It made a big fellow out of me. Then he used me to front for him."

"Where'd he get his in the project?"

"He owned most of the valley real estate which went off on auction before the dam was started. He had the project announced right after he had all the land he wanted. Donaldi and I got in on the second rise. And we were in the great plan, too. You know that?"

"The one," said Cash, "whereby the market was going to be hammered down and the price melted away; and then you fellows would horn back in for the big rise after the weak spot in the dam was fixed?"

"That's it," said Maele, "only Donaldi and I had one better for them. We really fixed the dam so it would break. When the mayor heard that he really got sore. He wanted to blow up the works to save his own skin and blame it on his enemies."

"Then it did blow up," said Cash.

"Where does MacKenzie fit?"

"MacKenzie," said Maele, "was a chiseler. He had something on Rossi. What, I don't know. But I know he got the bank interested in the mortgage business which played into the mayor's hand. He got his. He was trying to shake down Donaldi and me for one hundred thousand dollars, believing that the dam wouldn't hold. Donaldi got panicky and told the mayor. I think the rest is self-explanatory."

"But where does young Crane come in?" said Jimmy.

"MacKenzie wanted to regain the paper for Crane so he could run it," said Maele. "I guess he felt if he had the money behind him he could go to the mayor and say: 'The jig's up. Here's so much money. The paper's mine.' I swear I don't know how Crane got into that accident."

"That's simple," said Jeff; "only a crude operator like Captain Simmons would doctor the motor of an airplane to kill a man."

"Do you know that?" asked Maele.

"Certainly," said Jeff. "He'll talk, too, to save his face.

"Will you come with me now?" asked Cash.

They started out of the house and were met on the sidewalk by Falls and Millicent talking amiably with Mayor Kobb and Captain Simmons, the latter duet with their arms handcuffed.

"Gorman," said Kobb, "if I ever get out of these things I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"No doubt," said Cash, "you could do it, mayor. But it wasn't I with my little fists who parted your hair. That was my friend here."

CHAPTER XIV.

WATER OVER THE DAM.

FALLS took the party up the service elevator of the hotel, back to the suite Cash occupied.

"It might look better," said Falls, "if the entire city didn't know its dictator was caught—not tonight, anyway."

"It's been a long time," commented Kobb to Falls as they rode up in the elevator.

"That is right, Kobb," replied Falls. "I told you five years ago, I'd be back. Now we have it all wrapped up. Even I could convict you."

"Has this picture been shown here before?" asked Jeff.

"Don't tell me, Mr. Gorman," asked Falls, "that you think we have been asleep on Mayor Kobb? Why, we've been trying to find out where his money

came from for years. Now we won't have to do that; or will we?"

"I guess not," said Jeff, "with Maele here in good voice it should be the mayor's turn to tell where he got the money to make the investments he did."

"For our purposes," said Falls, "we'll let that go for the curious to find out. What we are interested in is simply: if he had enough money to swing all of these deals, why he didn't pay tax on the money in the first place."

Kobb looked blank and disinterested. He said nothing. It was obvious from Simmons' expression that he was going to play it through. He was brazen and determined.

"I'll take those things off," said Falls, as the party reached the door to the room. "I've a friend of yours here, mayor, and I wouldn't want you to miss shaking hands with him."

Falls released Kobb and Simmons. Each rubbed his wrists and Jeff pushed through the door. Rossi was pacing up and down. A tall, athletic man leaned against the table under which Jimmy had hid an hour before. He watched Rossi as if he were counting a beat on him. Jeff noticed the expression on Simmons' face on sight of this man. The blood seemed to drain from him.

"You've met before?" Falls commented.

"Hello, John; glad to see you, Lou," said the man. "See you still keep strange company." He nodded toward Maele. "How are you, Millicent?"

"My name's Gorman," said Jeff, extending his hand.

"This is Chief Kelsey," said Falls to Jeff; "he'll take over the prisoners, I think, when we get the story straight."

Two other men came from the bedroom. It was evident they were F. B. I. men. Falls deployed his men around the room and went into the far bedroom to set up equipment for the compilation of statements. He returned ready for action.

"Wait one moment, Bill," said Kobb to the police chief who had been on an extended vacation, forced under the heel of Kobb's iron rule. "Let's talk this over."

"Lou," said Kelsey, "there's nothing to talk over. Falls and I have already agreed that there will be no foolishness with those murder charges. We would have a hard job proving it, yeah, John?"

"I don't know," said Simmons, "we've got Donaldi's prints on a gun."

"Unfortunately, captain," said Falls, "Donaldi was in Chief Kelsey's room here in the hotel with us when MacKenzie was shot."

Simmons was unmoved.

"That will come in its proper order," said Falls. "The important thing now is Mr. Maele; we mustn't keep him waiting. And then there is Mr. Kobb himself. If you will, Mr. Kobb." He directed the mayor into the room.

"I'd like to speak privately for a moment to the chief," he said.

"Sure, mayor," replied Kelsey. They retired to the other room, while Jeff gave some details to the impatient Rossi.

"It is very simple, Martin," said Jeff, "Mayor Kobb is now proposing that he plead guilty to income-tax evasion instead of his appropriation of Federal funds and connivance to wreck a project in which much Federal money has been poured. Mr. Maele, if he is left holding the bag, will speak freely to save his neck. Is that not true, Mr. Maele? Mr. Donaldi will do the same. Q. E. D.: Mayor Kobb and his stooge here get more than their expected dividends."

The erstwhile publisher of the Santa

Paula *Sentinel* only looked miserable. He did not answer. Rossi's eyes popped as Jeff supplied the missing parts. Then, casually, Jeff said the bank might not lose its investment after all.

"Listen," Rossi asked impatiently, "do you think that dam can be repaired and this project made to go after all?"

"We're counting on it," said Cash.

"What do you mean?" asked Millicent.

"I think that hole can be fixed," said Cash; "in fact my associate, Mr. Ranger, the muscle man, assures me—"

"Cut it out, Cash," said Jimmy. There was a rustle behind them. They turned and looked toward the window. The curtain was blowing out of it. Simmons was not there. Jeff ran to the window. A crowd was assembling around a form on the pavement eleven stories below. Simmons had jumped out of the window.

"That's one they'll save expenses on," said Jimmy. Nobody else said anything. Millicent looked as if she were going to faint and Jimmy rushed a drink into her hand.

Jeff knocked at the door and told Kelsey. In a few minutes Kelsey came to the door and called Falls. They conferred a few minutes and returned. Falls remained alone in the bedroom for some time.

"For the time being," he said, when he returned to the room, "you will remain in—what is it they call it in Europe?—protective custody. Chief Kelsey will look out for that. My chief will fly out tomorrow and if it can be arranged to his satisfaction it will be all right."

Cash knew Kobb had proposed a plea to income-tax violation. He bade the chief and mayor good night and Falls remained behind. Martin Rossi joined him as he was leaving with Millicent by the arm and Jimmy rushing to her aid on the other side.

"Martin," said Cash, "please don't be getting your bank into messes like this in the future."

"Or me," said Millicent. "I've had about all I can stand of this."

"Say," said Jimmy, "since all these guys are knocking themselves off and returning stolen property, you'll wind up as the editoress or something of the *Sentinel,* won't you?"

"Now don't tell me, James," said Cash, "that you've always had ambitions to be a newspaperman."

"As a matter of fact you're right, Cash," said Jimmy, "that is the truth. If that MacKenzie can impersonate a newspaperman while having the heart of a snake, why can't I with a heart of—"

"Pure water," said Cash. . . . "Well, all right, James. You stay, if you like. You'll have plenty to keep you busy. For the way I'm hooked in this valley, I won't have a dime when I walk out if that dam can't be repaired."

"Yes," said Millicent, "what about that?"

"Well," said Cash, "as I saw the thing when it was going, only a small section of it broke. That idea of other sections crumbling must have been a radio reporter's delusion."

"Maybe it's just as well I've got a job," said Jimmy. "You were getting tiresome, anyway."

"All right, James, I'll send for you when you get in the chips," said Cash. "Tell me how are you going to buy an airplane on a reporter's salary?"

"I'm going to be an editor or nothing," said Jimmy.

THE END.

Goldfarb's Great Regatta

BY ROSS RUSSELL

• Hyman chases an idea from the backwoods of Tennessee across an angry stretch of open sea.

"IT'S a great idea," mused Leo the Interloper with some enthusiasm. "If you could only copyright it!"

"It don't have to be put in writing!" stated Goldfarb, hotly. "Leo, I am strictly a word of mouth operator. And once these real-estate guys give my idea a listen—"

Hyman Goldfarb, Entrepreneur Extraordinary, as he called himself on his new business card, gestured expansively

toward the west exposure of the hotel suite where a battery of windows faced the blue-green waters of the Gulf of Mexico. "Yes, Leo, once these gentlemen hear me out, we are back in the long green lettuce leaves, my friend!"

"Well, personally," said Leo, rubbing at his long sour face, "I am not a trusting guy and do not like to wind up in the switch. However, it is strictly your idea, Hyman, and if there are a few bucks in it so much the better."

Goldfarb nodded abstractedly. "Thousands, thousands. Ah, Leo, what a view!" Goldfarb allowed his small, brilliant black eyes to drink in the panorama framed by the windows. It was truly a magnificent vista, the sort of thing spread in soft rich colors across travel posters to lure visitors southward. The water of the gulf was of the blandest azure, as smooth as a pond, except where it creamed briefly against the unbroken strip of white sand. Some distance offshore, seven miles, to be exact, as prominent as a precious gem in a chaste setting, lay the palm-studded island.

This island was the magnetic center of the brainstorm whirling inside the bald skull of Hyman Goldfarb, Entrepreneur Extraordinary.

Leo the Interloper did not look toward the windows but continued to study the opposite wallpaper soberly. "The view," he said, "is costing us plenty."

"A very necessary part of the front!" Goldfarb pointed out.

"We ain't got much scratch left," Leo the Interloper countered realistically. "If these real-estate ginzos don't show up today—"

The low buzz of the telephone galvanized Goldfarb. He crossed the room quickly, seized the white enamel handset, and began to smile and nod as the instrument whispered hoarsely, "A party to see you, Mr. Goldfarb. Shall I send them up?"

"By all means!" exclaimed Hyman. His hand was shaking a little as he pronged the instrument. "That's them, Leo!"

"This is it," corrected Leo the Interloper. "You want I should disappear?"

"By no means. You're my witness!"

A knock informed Goldfarb that his visitors were at hand. He opened the door and four substantial-looking gentlemen, wearing carelessly expensive sport clothes and excellent sun tans, entered. All were past middle age.

"Goldfarb? A pleasure, I'm sure. Coupon is the name. Horace Coupon. Yes, I'm chairman of the board of directors of Offshore Holdings Corp.," Mr. Coupon, a well-fed individual with white hair parted boyishly, paused to introduce the others.

Goldfarb was too excited to catch the names. He gathered that Coupon was the really important person, the power controlling untapped capital, whose decision would so vitally influence Goldfarb's immediate future. Hyman lost no time coming to the point.

"Yes, the island is one of our holdings," admitted Horace Coupon as the others took seats arranged for them in chairs facing the windows. "Matter of fact, these other gentlemen and myself have occasionally used its as a game fishing headquarters. No, it isn't inhabited, except by a few pelicans."

Horace Coupon blinked and cleared his throat as he continued. "Er . . . Mr. Goldfarb, I understand the urgency of your conference is prompted by a certain proposition relative to our island—"

"Correct," said Goldfarb. "If you'll have a chair. Yes, facing the windows. There!" Goldfarb smiled confidently.

Then, gesturing toward the seascape, he said in an ecstatic voice, "Pelican Island! A mere speck on the map of these United States. But across that water, gentlemen, lies a heaven on earth! A Lotus land! A variable paradise!"

"I understand the winds are very variable," said Leo the Interloper. "In the spring the winds blow—"

Goldfarb silenced Leo the Interloper with a Gorgonizing stare. To his discomfort the new line of thought prompted one of the directors to say, "That's right, we had quite a blow here in 1926. Just short of a hurricane. Ripped out half the trees over on Pelican."

"The weather in 1926 was most unusual," said Horace Coupon shortly. "We don't talk about it. Now, let's get to the point, Mr. Goldfarb. Our time is valuable."

"Splendid," said Goldfarb. "I'll be brief. My proposition concerns the promotion of Pelican Island, which I have taken the liberty to rename Paradise Island, as a real-estate development project catering to retired people in the middle income bracket—estates of, say, five to fifteen thousand dollars complete with private beach and small boat landings." Goldfarb gazed brightly at the group to measure the effect of his statement.

The directors were chewing it over. "Well, Mr. Goldfarb," said Coupon, continuing to act as spokesman of the Offshore Holding Corporation directors. "There's nothing new in that!"

"There's nothing new under the sun," countered Goldfarb. "My idea has to do with promotion and free publicity for the development."

One of the directors spoke up. "Say, that bunch that owned property down the coast put it across last year with their Honeymoon Island scheme. Remember? Free accommodations for honeymooners? Received all sorts of gratis publicity in the papers."

"We can hardly repeat *that* stunt!" Coupon snapped.

Goldfarb smiled. "Gentlemen, the Goldfarb plan is superior in every respect. First permit me to ask a question: At how much would you estimate the cost of this Honeymoon Island promotion?"

Horace Coupon made rapid mental calculations. "Counting construction, railroad fare, newspaper advertisements, investigation of worthy couples, provisions and so on, I'd say roughly thirty thousand dollars."

"And well worth it," opined one of the directors.

"Now," said Goldfarb, "suppose I outlined a promotional plan for Pel—pardon me, Paradise Island, which would eliminate any construction, all advertisements whatsoever, and *cost less than thirty thousand?*"

The board looked interested.

"We'd have to hear the details, naturally," said Coupon.

"Gentlemen, think back to 1926 or thereabouts. Recall a venture known as the Bunion Derby, a running race across the continent touching various cities and towns en route."

Coupon laughed sharply. "I remember it well. Cost C. C. Pyle his shirt!"

"An idea that failed. Why? Too spread out. My idea, on the other hand, will focus the attention of the entire country on Paradise Island and Elixir City. It will attract colorful personages, visitors, sportsmen, and command absolutely unlimited free newspaper publicity, just as did the Bunion Derby, and the Catalina-Los Angeles Marathon Swim of a generation ago. My idea is sim-

plicity itself. Twenty thousand dollars will cover everything. This sum is to be put in the form of a purse for what will be nationally known as the Paradise Island Rowing Regatta—"

"Rowing Regatta?"

"Exactly!" cried Goldfarb, warming to his subject. "Our announcements will be to the effect that fifteen thousand dollars of the purse shall be paid to the first entrant rowing a boat from the mainland here at Elixir City to Paradise Island. The remainder of the purse shall be divided among other entrants. The Goldfarb regatta will be a sensation, attracting every well-known oarsman in the entire world. I personally have a lead on the whereabouts of the retired single sculls champion, Otto Zwickler, several times honored as one of the outstanding athletes of the century. Think of it! Renowned oarsmen! Fishermen, crabmen, boatmen, rivermen, men, women, boys of all nations, creeds, and colors, all competing in a twenty-thousand-dollar-dinghy derby from Elixir Beach to your island! Speculation as to the respective merits of professional and amateur rowers over a grueling seven-mile stretch of open sea will occupy every sports page in the country. People will flock here for the event. The influx of new business alone should nearly balance the purse. And finally, gentlemen, when the lucky oarsman touches the sparkling white sands of Paradise Island, the attention of the entire civil world will be instantly riveted to this fair jewel of the azure seas!" Goldfarb's voice, a bit hoarse from emotional strain, ended on a high note and there was silence.

Hyman relaxed eloquently and sat down. "Well, gentlemen?" he asked after a moment.

"Ahem," commented Horace Coupon. "Now, before going further, I think we should ask what compensation Mr. Golldfarb expects for his idea."

"Goldfarb is not a greedy man," said Hyman humbly. "However, ideas such as this do not come every morning, and, I think we agree, ideas are money. I had no fixed sum in mind. Rather, I should prefer to contribute my own efforts to the Goldfarb Regatta plan, as, say, director of publicity and promotion, and be compensated accordingly, on a share basis."

"Hm-m-m," said Mr. Coupon gravely. He arose. "Well, Goldfarb, a decision at the moment is out of the question of course. There's one additional stock holder whose wishes on the matter must be respected. Suppose we sleep on it—"

"Fine and dandy!" exclaimed Goldfarb. "I'll see you in my dreams." He gave them a large smile.

"You'll hear from us, sir," said Coupon.

With that the board of directors of Offshore Holdings Corp. took its departure.

A FEW days passed. Goldfarb's white-enamel telephone remained mute. Leo the Interloper stalled the assistant general manager of the Ponce de Leon Gables on another week's rent bill. Still no word came from Coupon. Leo grew restless. Goldfarb counseled patience, but when even the fortnight brought no word of the directorial decision the pressure was sufficient to send them both calling, in person, resplendent in newly pressed tropical suits.

Offshore Holdings occupied a rather impressive set of offices in a stucco building on the outskirts of town. As Goldfarb and Leo the Interloper entered, it was at once apparent the real-estate headquarters housed a veritable beehive

of activity. Secretaries bustled about and there was a general atmosphere of expectancy and tense preparation. For what?

"Mr. Coupon?" echoed a secretary. "He's very, *very* busy. I'm sorry, but Mr. Coupon isn't seeing *anyone* today!"

"A rat I smell," said Leo the Interloper.

Suspicion crept over the carefully composed features of the Entrepreneur Extraordinary. Dismissing the protestations of the secretary with a peremptory wave of the cigar, Goldfarb waded through the office wicket and barged into Coupon's private sanctum. Goldfarb's sudden fears were instantly and graphically substantiated.

Horace Coupon, nattily turned out in big executive blue flannel, was at the very moment inspecting a huge artist's layout for a poster advertisement! Goldfarb's horrified eyes read the dancing letters:

PARADISE ISLAND FLORIDA REGATTA
$25,000 CASH PRIZES

"So!" charged Goldfarb vitriolically.

"Why, gentlemen!" cried Coupon in surprise. "This *is* a pleasure!"

"Hah, you're meaning to tell me we was expected?"

"As a matter of fact, I intended calling you this very afternoon. The directors of Offshore Holdings have unanimously adopted your splendid idea for promoting Paradise Island!" Coupon's blue eyes smiled at them brightly. Too brightly, thought Hyman.

"So I see," said Goldfarb, pushing past the artist. "Also it ain't Pelican Island any more either! Start talking, Coupon!"

"We are all ears," seconded Leo the Interloper.

"Now, just a minute, please, gentlemen!" cried Coupon. "Everything is in order. We've accepted your idea and voted to pay you for it. As a matter of fact, I have a check right here."

"And why wasn't I consulted?" demanded Goldfarb.

"Now, Mr. Goldfarb!" Coupon smiled reassuringly. "Suppose you consult the figures on this check. I'm sure you'll experience a pleasant surprise!" Coupon proffered the draft.

One quick look at the figures caused Hyman Goldfarb to burst his topper. "Five hundred dollars!" shouted Goldfarb three times, each more vehemently

"Generous, isn't it?" asked Horace Coupon rhetorically. "I thought you'd be surprised. After all, Offshore is taking all risks and—"

"Five hundred dollars!" exclaimed Goldfarb for the fourth time, his cigar glowing with a sinister red glare. "Why, my idea is worth thousands! A futchin!"

"I can understand your feelings. The idea was your own brain child, so to speak. But I'm afraid five hundred is our price," said Coupon in a cheery, impersonal tone.

Stunned though he was, Goldfarb was conscious that a great change had occurred in his estimation of Horace Coupon. The man was a specious hypocrite, a blatant phony, a high-priced chiseler, if not worse. The hated Greenpoint epithet sprang automatically to Hyman's lips, "You goniff!"

"Coupon," Leo the Interloper elaborated, "you are a thief."

Coupon flushed with discomfort. "Very well, if you feel that way, Offshore will take your idea and pay you exactly nothing for it!". Coupon retorted in a snapping tone which tore the last wrapping of pretense from his true character.

Leo the Interloper's thin lips curved

in a knowing smile, as much as to say Coupon had baldly indicted himself.

However, Goldfarb said, "Pay? Pay? You goniff, you'll pay through the nose!"

"Really?"

"Through the nose!" repeated Goldfarb. "By court order!"

"I don't think so," said Horace Coupon coolly.

"Yeah?" Goldfarb jerked a stubby thumb at Leo the Interloper. "This getleman right here was witness to the meeting two weeks ago when I outlined my plans for Goldfarb's Great Regatta! A witness, hear! I'll get lawyers! I'll bring my witness to court! I'll bleed you, Horace Coupon! I'll bleed you for thousands, millions maybe!" Goldfarb's voice shook.

Calmly, Horace Coupon reached into the desk drawer and extracted a sheaf of papers bearing the letter marks of a nationally known detective agency. "Now, my good people, if you'll allow *me* to speak I'll outline very briefly my reasons why I do not think that *this gentleman*, as you call him"—Coupon paused to indicate Leo the Interloper—"will not prove a particularly useful witness in the suit contemplated. Yes, I will even go so far as to say, Mr. Goldfarb, that your very contemplation of the suit is ill-advised, not to mention rash and futile—"

Coupon cleared his throat. "According to this investigation, Leo Bagel, also known as Leo the Interloper, is wanted on the following charges: By the Sheriff of Dade County, Florida, bunco operations; by the Chief of Police of Los Angeles, California, gambling; by—" Coupon read off two more charges, apparently fresh from police blotters, all of which caused Leo the Interloper to wince as if from physical blows. "In short, it does not appear that Mr. Bagel would make a very good witness, in fact, I would go so far as to say Mr. Bagel is strictly *persona non grata.*"

This last slap was too much for Leo the Interloper who drew himself up. "I resent that!" flared Leo. *"Keenly!"*

Coupon ignored Leo the Interloper. "Mr. Goldfarb," continued Coupon mercilessly, "I'm afraid you haven't a leg to stand on. Now, for the last time, simply in the interest of fair dealing, and to preserve my own conscience, I'm giving you a chance to accept our check!"

"Fair play!" shouted Goldfarb. "Conscience! Five hundred dollars! An idea worth a futchin! A child from my brain you wanna buy for five hundred dollars! That for your check!" So saying, Goldfarb tore the bank draft with trembling hands; then, followed by the muttering Interloper, marched from the office.

NEITHER Hyman Goldfarb nor Leo the Interloper spoke until they had regained the sanctity of their suite at the Ponce de Leon Gables. Leo walked to the bedroom and from under a pile of shirts pulled out a .38-caliber, short-nosed detective special, complete with shoulder holster and harness.

"Take it easy, Leo!" admonished Goldfarb. "Chucking slugs ain't gonna help matters."

"What was that name Horace Coupon called me?" demanded Leo the Interloper.

"Persona au gratin," replied Goldfarb. "In French it means you fried him. It isn't important."

"Maybe I should ought to call up Cold-deck Crandall and Fantastic Frank from Miami and really work this Horace Coupon party over?" Leo the Inter-

loper examined the chambers of the detective special; then, with an effort, tossed the equalizer back in the drawer. "However, as you say, it wouldn't buy us nothing. Yes, Goldfarb, my friend, we should have taken the five hundred! It was an error. Hyman, are you listening to me?"

For an answer Goldfarb rattled the derby violently against the sides of his perspiring skull. It was a tic characteristic of the Enterpreneur Extraordinary when visited by an electric storm in the form of thought waves. With a bang Hyman jammed the hard hat down on his head and his startled eyes took on a gleam of fanatical triumph. He exclaimed, "Leo, did I understand you to say we should have taken the five hundred? No, my misguided friend—never! No, Leo, we will take the fifteen thousand!"

"Please talk sense, Hyman, not forgetting the rent on this spread is just two weeks past due."

Goldfarb scuttled across the suite to the windows and looked out as if to make sure Paradise Island had not moved. "Of course!" he cried. "A cinch! Why didn't I think of it before?"

"Think of what?" demanded Leo the Interloper.

"Zwickler!" cried Goldfarb.

"The rower?"

"The champion of the world!" Goldfarb replied as he dived into a brief case. In a moment he had extracted a newspaper clipping somewhat discolored by age. "Listen to this, Leo!" Goldfarb began reading rapidly. The words tumbled from his jerking lips:

"Where Are They Now Department. Your favorite sports columnist is still running down rumors as to the present whereabouts of Otto Zwickler, unquestionably the greatest oarsman of modern times and one of the current generation's outstanding athletes, whose retirement from active competition was announced last fall. It will be remembered Zwickler had just finished making his fourth consecutive clean sweep of every single sculls rowing event in England and America and was actually forced into retirement because of lack of competition. Since then nothing has been heard of the blond giant whose feats etched rowing history. It seems probable that Zwickler, tired of the publicity he always detested, has turned his back on the front pages to seek out a business career of his own in some secluded spot.

"Get that?" Goldfarb panted. "The guy is so good he hadda quit. There wasn't nobody in the world good enough to give him more than a brisk workout!"

Leo the Interloper straightened. "Hyman, I'm beginning to get the idea. In other words, he could spot the rest of the gees in this Paradise Island Regatta a clean half-mile and beat 'em to the wire by considerable more than a dirty nose?"

"Your illusions are one hundred percent correct!" shouted Goldfarb.

"But," protested Leo the Interloper. "Your article says this Otto has pulled down the curtain!"

"I have further information! In Miami I ran into the big-time sports scribbler, Tip McArdle. McArdle had just heard where Zwickler was." Goldfarb made another plunge into the brief case. This time he came up with an address book and, consulting the X-Y-Z section, ran a feverish thumbnail to the entry: "O. Zwickler, champion rower, Lickskillet Gap, Kentucky."

"Never heard of it!"

"It ain't even in the new census."

"Maybe it's a hide-out. Maybe this Zwickler is hot!" exclaimed Leo the Interloper in alarm.

"It's a hide-out, but the guy ain't hot. Otto Zwickler does not smoke, chew, drink, gamble, or otherwise desecrate himself. The guy just doesn't like publicity. According to my information Zwickler is practically a hermit, living miles from people and civilization in general."

Leo the Interloper thought this over. "Suppose he ain't in shape. Remember that seven miles haul across the drink ain't gonna be no snap, even for a muscle man like Zwickler. There'll be plenty of tough competition from guys that row a boat every day of their life. Besides, this Lickskillet Gap layout don't sound like no place for rowing. How long since Zwickler retired?"

"Only less than a year," supplied Goldfarb.

Leo the Interloper snapped his fingers. "Hyman, we got a chance, but there ain't no time to lose."

"Time is of the essence," stated Goldfarb, reiterating one of his favorite aphorisms.

Just then the telephone disturbed their thoughts. Leo the Interloper seized the instrument. At once his voice took on a snarling quality. "Oh, ya would, eh? Well, try and get it. A thousand ain't nowhere near enough. That's final, you fat toad!" Leo the Interloper slammed down the handset. "Coupon!" Leo said interpretively. "Wanted a line on Zwickler. We gotta move fast, Hyman. We gotta reach that Zwickler party fast —"

"Not to mention foist!" added Goldfarb.

"You can pick up contract forms on the way. Sign him fort fifty percent of the take, a third if he won't stand still for no more. And see to it he pays all expenses."

"What about scratch?" Goldfarb inquired deflatedly. "Leo, I'm down to my last sawbuck."

"Don't worry, Goldfarb!" Leo the Interloper said magnanimously. "Here's two hundred. Hop a train for that Lickskillet Gap hide-out and spill the ink. Leave me the hotel bill to worry about. I'll take myself a quick sneak as soon as you haul freight and beat it down to Miami and with the help of an old pal or two pick up a few large bills. Then I'll be along!"

Goldfarb's eyes welled with tears at this show of resourcefulness and generosity on the part of Leo the Interloper. Hastily, he packed—a single suitcase such as might be carried on a brief overnight trip to fool the hotel management. Twenty minutes later Goldfarb and Leo the Interloper solemnly shook hands. Then Goldfarb made a hasty exit, and before sundown was riding the rails toward the north, toward the mountain fastnesses of Kentucky and Lickskillet Gap.

THE railroad journey consumed twenty-four hours and was easily the least difficult part of the expedition. After disembarking at an obscure station in northeastern Kentucky, Hyman Goldfarb rode a series of busses, each more antiquated than the last, until, by various divagations and manifold transfers, he penetrated the remoter fastnesses of the hill country.

As he rode, Goldfarb watched civilization shuck off its thin veneer. He began to fell himself a modern Stanley on the trail of an athletic Livingstone. Custom and dress grew more strange with each mile and he was soon to lament his unwise choice of garments, for the hand of winter still reigned here. Disheveled, unshaven, chilled to the innards, with only the jaunty angle of his

hard hat to remind those who knew him of the indomitable Goldfarb, the Entrepreneur Extraordinary eventually reached the last outpost and made arrangements to be carted overland to Zwickler's hide-out by means of horse and wagon. But his elation over the discovery that Zwickler still existed apart from myth was clouded by dire misgivings. Even the bearded, narrow-eyed hill folk spoke of the exile of the oars with obvious distrust.

However, the poet and nature lover in Hyman Goldfarb, undernourished as it was by a boyhood on New York's East Side, would never forget the breath-taking moment when the spring bed wagon labored over the last few feet of the narrow pass and he at last found himself looking down on the mountain retreat of the man whose mighty forearms and elbows had, to use the sport scribe's phrase, "etched rowing history."

"This," said hillbilly teamster with an air of finality, "is as far as I'd care tuh go, stranger."

"Yeah, sure," responded Goldfarb. "What are those things across there on the mountain?" Goldfarb indicated the strange shapes that seemed to be gazing back at them with a sphinxlike inscrutability.

"Nobody knows," said the teamster, "but danged ef I'm goin' no farther." The man spat. "You owe me seventy-five cents."

Goldfarb nodded and paid off, openhandedly adding a quarter from his dwindling funds by way of tip. Without a word the guide swung the wagon around and rattled off.

Dusk was falling. Goldfarb felt his way gingerly over the rocky set of ruts, his two-toned, wing-tip, sports shoes affording him uncertain footing. Descending, he found himself in a gap that opened between the walls of the mountains, a sort of a small meadow, its floor carpeted by an early stand of new grass. Near at hand, fed by a mountain stream, lay a kind of mill pond. The pond was perhaps one hundred yards in diameter and its water, as still as glass, lightly supported a single-seated rowing shell complete with oars.

"Keeping himself in condition!" Goldfarb diagnosed. "I knew this wasn't gonna be no wild-goose chase!"

He hurried toward a group of buildings, obviously of makeshift construction, that stood farther down the mountain valley. One of these seemed to be a large workshop and was fitted out with various tools; another, a rude dwelling, though no smoke came from its leaning chimney. Goldfarb shivered, halloed, received a ghastly ringing echo for an answer, and set himself to walking briskly about in order to keep warm.

During his walk he spied a large packing case, marked with Zwickler's name and address. Closer examination revealed that it contained a jumble of silver trophies and loving cups. Goldfarb made out prizes awarded Zwickler for winning the Henley and other internationally famous regattas. The trophies were piled in against one another without wrapping. Many had been dented by this treatment and all were badly tarnished. This discovery added to Goldfarb's growing doubts.

"Looks like he wouldn't give eight cents for the lot of them," Goldfarb muttered uneasily. "But the boat shows he's still keepin' himself in shape. That's the main thing. *What* the—"

A random glance had riveted Goldfarb's attention to one of the sphinxlike figures on the mountain overhead. This, he perceived, bore a striking likeness to Jack Dempsey! Further examination of

another figure revealed the heavy-jowled visage of none other than the Sultan of Swat, the mighty Babe Ruth, hewn dramatically from the cliff! Completely bewildered, Hyman began an intent study of the third huge face. He could make nothing of it. Apparently this one was of a broad Jehovahlike visage notable for its squareness and powerful bone structure.

"Fuh crying g-out loud!" Goldfarb cried, lapsing into unadulterated Greenpoint in his excitement.

"Looking fer somebody?"

The voice seemed to come from the depths of a cavern. Goldfarb spun, teetering drunkenly, and found himself confronted by a great bearded barefooted man garbed only in overalls.

"Y-yes—" squeaked Goldfarb, "I'm looking for Mr. Zwickler."

"I'm Otta Zwickler," said the barefooted man.

Goldfarb puffed furiously at a cigar to hide his confusion. His mind raced. His shallow but probing eyes tore away the facial spinach and in a moment he recognized the prototype of the third stone face hewn out of the mountain—Otto Zwickler had carved himself there, alongside Dempsey and Ruth! Then the sense of frustration that Hyman Goldfarb always experienced at an opportunity wasted overcame him as he realized he had let slip the chance to restate Stanley's immortal line—"Otto Zwickler, I presume."

Turning up the dials of his personality, Goldfarb strode toward the expressionless giant, extending one hand in the traditional gesture of peace between strangers. "Goldfarb is the name—Hyman Goldfarb, Entrepreneur Extrardinary!" Goldfarb produced one of his engraved business cards. "Hyman Goldfarb, who has come all the way from Greenpernt by way of Florida, bearing good news. Yes, Otto, little as you know it, this meeting is the beginning of a wonderful friendship of a partnership whose profits shall be measured in the thousands, and that sooner than you think. In short, Otto, I have sought you out here in your rude mountain retreat to bring you back, just once more, for the greatest and richest regatta of them all!" Goldfarb smiled, moving his chin toward the mill pond, and was about to comment on the condition of the exile of the oars, which was obviously of the pinkest.

The sepulchral voice answered hollowly, "Ain't interested in no regattas. Come here on account of I wanted to be alone." There was a leaden pause. Then Zwickler added grudgingly, "'Pears like there's no help but for to put you up for the night. All right, but you'll have to leave in the morning." And with that the hermit of Lickskillet Gap walked into the hut.

Hyman Goldfarb absorbed this blow with characteristic calm, outwardly at least. Obviously, he had taken the wrong approach. High pressure was out, but definitely. Rapidly sizing up his man as slightly off-center if not downright wacky, Goldfarb shelved further conferences until later. Otto Zwickler had to have a weak spot somewhere, an Achilles heel which would prove vulnerable to Goldfarb's perspicacity and verbal barrages. Accepting the rough dinner the hermit offered him and the hospitality of the blazing fire, Goldfarb was soon in condition to willingly surrender himself to the arms of Morpheus.

THE sunshine pouring through the door and a queer rustling sound awakened him. It was morning—bright, virginal with the unsullied beauty of the

mountains. Goldfarb reached for his hat and sprang out of bed. The rustling sound came from the mill pond. There impelled by the rhythmic movement of Otto Zwigler's great torso, the single-seater shell was cutting the still, mirror-like water as a keen blade slits silk. It was a scene of pastoral loveliness worthy of a Corot. Never, Goldfarb felt, had sensuous beauty combined in his own soul with such opportunity for profit—and revenge. For one short terrible moment the bitterness and the hatred he felt for Horace Coupon welled up within him. Then he was fighting down these unworthy emotions, moving toward the lake.

Goldfarb did not quit Lickskillet Gap that day, or the next. Assiduously, he cultivated Otto Zwickler. Stoking up the personality, as only Goldfarb could when the pressure of great purpose spurred him on, he became by turns the sympathetic companion, the subtle flatterer, the agreeable diplomat.

Zwickler's weakness was soon apparent. It consisted of a passion for the mountain and an overwhelming lust to carve from its yielding granite the likenesses of that mighty triumvirate of sportdom—Ruth, Dempsey, Otto Zwickler. To carve them there for all time!

Hyman Goldfarb bowed humbly before such an ambition but never did he lose sight of the purpose which had brought him to the hill country. However, only the incessant puffing of his stogy reflected the inner mental turmoil against the composure of his features.

Blow by blow, Fate was hammering him down to size. The hermit was adamant in his refusal to countenance any scheme of returning to civilization, even for "just one more rowin' race." The sculpture was the all-important thing. After that, perhaps. Who knew? The single-seated scull and the morning work-outs—

"Jes' a leetle light paddlin' tuh keep fit."

Meanwhile the days were passing and the date of the Paradise Island Twenty-five-thousand-dollar Regatta drawing nearer, and, in general, time was of the essence. Since the breaks would not come for Goldfarb he had no choice but to make his own breaks.

On the mountaintop above the cliff stood an enormous windlass, the key piece of machinery to Zwickler's work. Effective means of sabotage of this essential had occupied Goldfarb's ever-pulsating gray cells for the best part of a week. Grudgingly surrendering moral integrity to necessity, Hyman decided to go through with a simple plan he had worked out. Control of the windlass depended upon a round bar of steel no larger than a cigarette. It was simple enough to fashion a duplicate part and weaken this by sawing it partially through. Slipping the gimmick in his pocket Hyman waited for the proper opportunity.

Faced with the task of delivering a particularly heavy and bulky set of tools and materials to a ledge halfway down the face of the cliff, Zwickler had decided upon the stunt of lowering the cargo by means of ropes to a point opposite the ledge. Then it would be a comparatively simple matter to unload the suspended freight. The ledge itself could be reached by a series of footholds chiseled from the rock.

Zwickler had just adjusted the heavy load to the proper level and was about to start down the rocky ladder when Goldfarb, seizing fortune by the forelock, effected his sabotage. It was the work of but a moment and Goldfarb's deft fingers did not fail him. Braking

the windlass by means of a rachet, he quickly substituted the gimmick for the stout steel pin. Then Hyman yelled, "HALP!" and jumped back, none too soon.

Things happened with frightening rapidity. Otto Zwickler turned, stared aghast as the gimmick pin first bent, as if subjected to intense heat, then gave completely. With a groan the windlass began reeling out rope with fantastic speed!

"God A'mighty!" shouted Zwickler. "Look out, Mr. Goldfob!" Moving with catlike speed the hermit scrambled up from the ladder and slammed Goldfarb against the remotest point possible of the granite wall behind the platform.

The windless cable went taut. There was a ripping, crunching sound, a blood-curdling grunt. Then the weight of the plunging load yanked the windlass off the brow of the mountain. It went crashing down and for minutes on end the canyons rang with terrible echoes. Goldfarb goggled at his handiwork with unabashed horror.

"L-l-looks like that p-pin just kinda gave 'way—" Goldfarb said weakly.

"Danged if she didn't," agreed Zwickler, dumfounded. "There goes my whole shebang—right when I was up to the point of puttin' on the finishin' teches on them figgers."

"H-how?" inquired Goldfarb. "H-how much costs a new windlass?"

" 'Tain't only the cost! Expense of gittin' 'er up here, too. Hunners of dollars, I reckon!"

Goldfarb steadied himself against Otto Zwickler's great frame. "Otto, old boy," Goldfarb quavered in a voice that would have consoled a condemned man, "there's only one answer—"

"What's that, Mr. Goldfob?"

"The regatta," said Goldfarb.

APPROACHING Elixir City the train was forced to cut its speed to a mere walking pace. Great crowds flooded the tracks and it was only with difficulty that the local Cossacks cleared the way for the arrival of the train bringing Otto Zwickler, variously styled as the Siegfried of the Single Sculls and the Oaf of the Oars, back to the world of wild applause and exploding flash guns. The press had learned of his intended participation in the Paradise Island race, though Goldfarb had delayed forwarding the entry blank until the last possible moment.

Meanwhile, elaborate preparations had been completed. Once convinced of the necessity for an expedition back to civilization for the Phillistine purpose of picking a few G notes off Mr. Horace Coupon's palmtrees, Otto Zwickler had shown himself a willing tool to Hyman Goldfarb's designs. It was decided to build a special boat for the seagoing sweepstakes and this was speedily effected at Lickskillet Gap. With remarkable craft, not to mention Goldfarb's willing assistance, Zwickler had fashioned an ocean-worthy shell complete with professional oarsman's sliding seat mechanism.

Leo the Interloper, following Goldfarb's devious route into the hinterlands, arrived at Lickskillet while this project was being carried out, fresh from a successful campaign at Miami. Leo brought news, verification of the regatta date, entry blanks, and most important of all, folding money. Fortunately, construction had not progressed past the point where a stern seat could be installed for a coxswain, for Coupon's official rules called for a rower's mentor in each entry.

Hyman Goldfarb, himself, bravely volunteered to act in this capacity during the dash over the seven-mile stretch of open

water and spent his spare moments practicing up on thirty-nine-stroke beats and other such necessary techniques.

As soon as the boat reached completion it was crated and shipped to Elixir City under Leo the Interloper's personal supervision. Goldfarb and Zwickler followed two days later, the hermit winding up his training preparation in the manner of Jack Dempsey, the boxing champion he so heartily admired, by doing plenty of roadwork and eating plenty of greens and side meat.

So, when the train arrived in Elixir City that night, some seventy-two hours before the great regatta, there was at least one friendly face in the milling crowd to greet Goldfarb and the hermit. Hyman alighted first, followed by Otto. The oarsman's sole concession to the demands of civilization had been to don a pair of old tennis shoes and a sheepskin coat over his customary overalls.

Goldfarb readily saw that to avoid publicity was quite out of the question. In an effort to shield Zwickler from the hated importunities of the fourth estate, Hyman elaborated at some length on the details of the promotion deal, telling how his original idea for the great regatta had been stolen by Coupon. The Entrepreneur Extraordinary went on to explain that only the pressure of circumstance had prompted him to seek out the greatest oarsman of the generation, sign and enter him in the twenty-five-thousand-dollar event. Victory for Zwickler would crown a career unchallenged in sport annals, insure the hermit of stake for life, and finally, in some measure, compensate Goldfarb for the snide dealings on the part of Coupon and associates.

Mr. Horace Coupon's peevish cross-claims were printed in the following day's papers, but Otto Zwickler remained the chief item of copy as the nation's press girded itself for the weirdest athletic spectacle since the Bunion Derby.

The event had attracted as motley and as colorful a crew of muscle men as had ever gathered in one spot, the guaranteed first prize of fifteen thousand dollars acting as a giant magnet. Every man and boy who fancied himself as an oarsman and could raise the means to reach Florida had come to compete. There're salty fishermen from Gloucester and the Gulf coast and Puget Sound, wind-burned oystermen from the Chesapeake, shrimp casters from the salt-water marshes of Georgia, sun-black Florida crabmen, rivermen, boatmen from the Great Lakes, Canuck guides, a Kanaka, Indians and two Eskimos.

That afternoon, while Leo the Interloper was helping Otto uncrate the specially-constructed seagoing scull, Hyman went down to the beach front to determine the caliber of their opposition. In the main it was of nonprofessional stamp. For a spell Goldfarb suffered one of his not infrequent attacks of misgivings. Clearly these nonprofessionals would enjoy a certain advantage on choppy water, and the gulf was liable to be that on almost any afternoon with enough breeze stirring to lift a sail. Rowing those seven long miles to Paradise Isle would not be like skimming down the still waters of, say, the Thames. Further, these unorthodox oarsmen were accustomed to long hours and burning sunshine and currents and prodigious distances in their daily work.

But Hyman's fears were eased as soon as the man from Lickskillet began to disport himself and the new shell on the blue-green water. Shifting rhythmically with the sliding seat, Otto Zwickler was clearly in a class by himself!

"Real thoroughbred!" opined Leo the Interloper almost enthusiastically. "Look at that beaver overhaul them other platers!"

"Strictly the class," said Goldfarb. "He can handle them oars like they was match wood!"

"We're in!" nodded Leo the Interloper. "He'd have to bust an arm to lose this one. It's like Seabiscuit against a bunch of beetles."

Suddenly Hyman Goldfarb removed his derby and slapped himself vigorously across the forehead. "Leo, he's too good, that's it!"

"What do you mean, too good?"

"Don't you get it? Already them other guys are beginning to look pale around the gills. We better get him out of there before they all walk out and there ain't no regatta." Adjusting the coxswain's megaphone around his face, Goldfarb began shouting urgently at Zwickler.

But the damage had been done. That night there was a general meeting of all contestants at the Elixir City auditorium. The fatal issue was debated hotly—whether or not the sliding seat should be permitted. Unhappily, only a small group of ex-collegian crewmen had constructed boats fitted out with this regulation mechanism, and there were few voices to help Goldfarb along.

Wearing his hypocritical smile, Horace Coupon readily gave in to the wishes of the majority. After a hurried conference the board of directors of Offshore Holdings handed down their decision: SLIDING SEATS WERE STRICTLY VERBOTEN!

Back in the hotel, Hyman Goldfarb paced the floor, working himself into a cold sweat, while Zwickler said again and again, "Yep, that sure does 'er. 'Tain't no use without my slidin' seat. No use 'tall!"

"You got to try anyway!" urged Leo the Interloper without too much conviction. "Remember, Otto, you're the best of the world. A real champion wins under any conditions!"

"But them other fellers been rowin' off solid seats all their life. Tell ya, don't stand no chance agin' 'em!"

"O. K., maybe we can't win," admitted Leo the Interloper. "But we aren't gonna give up, are we? You got a chance to cop off one of the other prizes. Right?"

Otto Zwickler simply studied his toes.

"Leo!" called Goldfarb softly.

Hyman was standing in one corner of the room, staring thoughtfully into the night, rattling his derby against his skull. Leo the Interloper recognized this fateful sign and hurried to the Entrepreneur Extraordinary. For several minutes the two engaged in a whispered conference with Goldfarb characteristically carrying the greater burden of conversation.

Finally Leo the Interloper nodded and went back to address Zwickler. "Otto," he said, "we don't ask you to do the impossible, just your level best. Now you get your sleep and leave the worrying to us."

Zwickler climbed into bed. "By the way, Mr. Leo, I just remembered, we ain't got us no rowboat neither!"

"I know," said Leo the Interloper understandingly. "Leave everything to us. Have confidence in Mr. Goldfarb!"

The hermit nodded and in a moment was sleeping like a baby.

Goldfarb and Leo the Interloper stole off into the night. Their first act was to obtain a boat, and that was not easy. Every available craft had long since been

snatched up. Therefore, it was necessary to steal one. They rented a launch and after a couple of hours of clandestine cruising about the yacht harbor managed to locate a fairly stout-looking dinghy.

"This'll do," Leo the Interloper said, cutting the painter. "There's our biggest problem. Now, Hyman, you beat it back to the hotel and get some sleep. Remember you gotta ride them seven miles tomorrow and keep that Zwickler baby pulling. Leave the rest to me!"

IT was a spectacle seen to best advantage from the air. For nearly half a mile boats of all shapes and descriptions cluttered the beach. Each had its own oarsman and cox, its group of well-wishers and self-appointed chandlers and pushers-off. Motorcycle police, cameramen mounted on cars, officials and technical superviser patrolled the beach. Final inspections were being made, as well as a check of life preservers and other safety equipment.

Offshore, on either side of the half-mile stretch of water which would shortly be transformed into a boiling maelstrom, stood yachts, power boats, pleasure cruisers, and even two coast guard cutters. Horace Coupon, resplendent in a new yachtsman's uniform, was clearly visible on the top deck of his Diesel houseboat which kept doubling back and forth along the starting line. Coupon was standing near a brass cannon whose bark would send the hundred and thirty-odd entrants plowing their way toward Paradise Island, now barely visible as a flat blob far out toward the horizon.

At ten minutes to twelve Hyman Goldfarb had been given a final O. K. by the official inspector and climbed to his position in the stern seat of the dinghy. Leo the Interloper began handing down the various pieces of equipment obtained at Goldfarb's order.

Goldfarb was suitably dressed for the ordeal. In place of underwear he wore a striped bathing suit and over this pants and suspenders; instead of a coat, a ship's life preserver. Leo the Interloper had located this at a marine outfitting house.

Otto was stripped down to a pair of denim bib overalls—the overalls and nothing more. Zwickler tested the seat, a regulation wooden affair built solidly into the dinghy. "Sure won't budge none. Well, like I said, I'll do the best I kin, but you fellers don't want to expect too much."

"Just obey Hyman," Leo the Interloper charged, handing down a tin of hard tack.

"The fifteen grand is as good as ours," said Goldfarb.

"And I'll be on hand to see we collect it, too," replied Leo the Interloper.

There were more delays, a rumor about possible postponement due to weather conditions, a storm of protests, a hurried last-minute conference of the board of directors aboard Horace Coupon's houseboat, then—at twelve twenty-five, the gun!

The great race was on!

Goldfarb felt himself pitched to the bottom of the dinghy. Otto Zwickler had sprung to the sand and all but bodily lifted the craft into the water! Goldfarb scrambled awkwardly back to position and without the loss of more than a few bars began giving Otto the beat—One-TWO, three-FOUR!" But the man from Lickskillet already had the dinghy moving strongly ahead. Boats bumped them on either side. The Eskimo kayak capsized. Oars locked. Boats rammed and sideswiped one another. Curses in half a dozen tongues

ripped through the noise of guns and sirens and auto horns.

The confusion of the first thousand yards was incredible. Out of it emerged perhaps a score of boats which were quickly establishing their position as the class of the field and of this group Zwickler was one.

"Steady, Otto!" cautioned Goldfarb and gazed around to ascertain their position.

The half-mile buoy was already sliding back into the tattered curtain of sooty clouds which obscured the mainland. Under it floundered dozens of desperate oarsmen, clinging to a vain hope of staying with the leaders. Zwickler, fourth at the thousand-yard marker, had now dropped to ninth position. A further check disclosed the hermit was losing ground, slowly but steadily. Riveted to the stationary seat he simply could not achieve his one-time championship form. However, Goldfarb's chant retained its hopeful timbre.

"Mis . . . ter Gold . . . fob—" panted Otto between strokes. "Ah jes' cain't do 'er! Jes' got to have that slidin' seat!"

"Don't worry," said Goldfarb reassuringly, although they had fallen back to thirteenth place and were barely staying with the real contenders.

Gray water and smoke-colored clouds. Salt spray and stinging rain that converted Goldfarb's cigar to a sodden roll of tobacco. Two miles, three, three and a half.

"They're gettin' farther and farther ahead of us, Mr. Goldfob!" Otto pointed out, pausing to rest a moment. In spite of the nasty weather he was sweating like a race horse. His great chest heaved. "If I only had that slidin' seat —"

Goldfarb nodded sympathetically and glanced at the horizons, such as they were. Most of the yachts and pleasure craft had turned back, the coast guard cutters and Horace Coupon's palatial houseboat, barely visible in the distance, indicated the race was still on.

"Otto," said Goldfarb. "I been keeping you under wraps on account of I didn't want a lot of yammering. But I do not think Mr. Coupon can bother us now. We're gonna cut loose!"

Hyman began rummaging around under the stern seat and pulled out a five-gallon can which Leo the Interloper had purchased the night before at a filling station and handed aboard the dinghy just before final inspection. The regatta official had passed the can without a remark. At the cost of a damaged thumb nail Hyman pried open the can. It contained five pounds of black axle grease. Then Hyman tore the wrappings away from a smaller package. Thus was revealed a small hand mop. Goldfarb dipped the mop into the gooey lubricating compound.

"Keep pulling, Otto," he instructed. "Just raise up. That's it!"

As Zwickler assumed a half standing position, Goldfarb daubed the dinghy seat liberally with grease. Zwickler sat down—and instantly slid! This caused the dinghy to fairly thrust itself at the waves. On the recovery Otto slid again. His second stroke was even more powerful than the first. The dinghy was like a live thing. A tremendous force seemed to be propelling it through the water. They were beginning to gain on the nearest competitor.

In a few moments Otto had accustomed himself to the new technique and, going into high gear, stroked their way back into twelfth position. A dumfounded rival gaped as they sped past in a rush of hissing water.

"Heck, Mr. Goldfob," said Otto. "This is dang near as good as my old sliding seat."

Hyman nodded. "Take it easy. If them overalls don't hold out we're licked. Remember that!" He lubricated Zwickler's seat again and they swept past another entrant.

IF anything, the going became worse. Sky and sea frequently exchanged positions as the dinghy reared and pitched and plunged on the boiling waves. Goldfarb bounced about, calling off the beat rhythmically, lubricating Otto's working surfaces at the slightest sign of friction. The five-mile buoy danced past and the dinghy derby went into its last grueling laps.

Zwickler was third now, closely pressing the giant Gloucesterman and the bull-like oyster picker from the Chesapeake. These rivals were made of tough fiber indeed and possessed unbelievable endurance. At Zwickler's approach they raised their beat to suicidal tempos—and kept it there.

Otto was working easily now, loafing almost. For the best part of a mile the oyster picker kept up. Then Otto turned on the heat and pulled away with child-like ease. Otto measured the span of turbulent water separating them from the Gloucesterman. Paradise Island loomed dimly ahead. It was just a question of the denim in the overalls now.

"Easy, Otto!" cautioned Goldfarb. "You're getting down mighty thin." The grease supply was low, too.

With titanic sweeps Zwickler powered the boat into the Gloucesterman's churning wake. Veins stood out on the forehead and neck of this formidable rival who, seeing the fifteen thousand dollars about to be snatched from his grasp, called upon superman efforts to maintain his slender lead. Otto gained a few inches at a time. The Gloucesterman was matching him, three strokes to two. They could hear his tortured breathing. The beach was visible now, and the heavy breakers beating on it.

"Easy, Otto!"

The man from Lickskillet grinned and, tired of the cat-mouse game, added a bit more length to his slide.

This did the trick, but as the dinghy began to draw away from the Cod belt entry, there was a tearing sound and Otto's overalls parted cleanly down the back. Hyman Goldfarb uttered a strangled cry. However, as the floundering boat twisted him around, he saw that the Gloucesterman had fainted dead away in exhaustion.

Then the dinghy was in the grip of the breakers and a vast body of water lifted them up so far that Otto's oars literally clawed at the scudding clouds. With a terrific numbing impact the boat struck Paradise Beach and plowed its keel through the hard gray sand.

Much later, aboard the coast guard cutter which was rushing them back to Elixir City so that a supply of bunion plasters could be obtained for Zwickler, one of the officials said, "As a promotional stunt it was a complete fiasco, but Coupon and his associates lost nothing. This last month has been the greatest here since the days of the boom. Well, I'm glad to see Zwickler win. There won't be any question about the money, Mr. Goldfarb."

Hyman nodded and lit a fresh cigar. "Class will tell," philosophized Goldfarb. "The emolument could not be rewarded to a worthier purpose. In granite, Otto Zwickler will be exonerated to prosperity."

THE END

Information Squeeze

BY ARTHUR MANN

• It took a little while for Joe Feder to understand his client's interest in racetracks.

It was brother vs. brother in the unpredictable offices of Ace Promotions, Inc., where, at the moment, President Joe Feder was staging a voluble and desperate struggle to siphon some of the firm's well-guarded funds from Treasurer Jake Feder. The president's excited, high-pitched voice permeated the suite of offices like the rattle of a riveting hammer, and sent annoying little chills up and down the spine of Sophie, the combination receptionist, secretary, typist and model of patience.

Within the room marked "Conference," Joe Feder propelled his slim frame with staccato steps through a ceiling zero of smoke from a cigar which oxidized first at one corner of his mouth and then the other. From his phrases and the tone used to proclaim them, it sounded like the end of a promising brother act—promising because most of Joe Feder's ambitious projects in promotion and finance ended on a promissory note, which brother Jake, a conservative and struggling lawyer, tucked away against the arrival of Joe's long-overdue ship.

"Time's a-fleetin', Jake!" Joe screamed. He drew out his watch. "Eleven o'clock a'ready."

"The pawnshops are open," Jake said coolly. "Go hock it!"

"From *you* I hear that!" Joe gasped, and slapped a thin, nervous hand against his limited expanse of perspiring brow. "I tell you this is for the firm. It's a project. The firm's got dough."

"Thanks to me."

"I mean dough for promotion," Joe corrected. "Dough was left over from the deal for Hauser's burglar alarm, an' I want it."

"It's in escrow," Jake replied firmly.

"I don't care if it's in China!" the other stormed. "I got to have a few frogskins—*bull*frogskins—but now! I got to be out there in an hour. A fortune's waitin'. So is Egon Hauser an' the guy who wants to buy the thing."

Jake's weary head wagged from side to side as though it were about to drop off.

"The midget broadcaster failed once, an' how!" he explained again. "It's not

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good business to pour more money in a loser till we click with something, especially when the firm's so in debt."

"In debt to who?" Joe demanded, and raised a restraining hand to stop Jake's reply of condemnation. "I know it's in debt to you, but what's money, except a means to an end? This is a deal. I tell you. The guy actually wants the midget broadcaster. He needs it. He'll buy plenty of 'em, maybe the manufacturing rights, but not till he sees a practical demonstration. Our business is to finance the demonstration. An' your duty is to haul out that dough. I feel like a pauper, beggin' this way for money."

"Why should you feel otherwise?" Jake inquired blandly.

Brother Joe's meager frame wilted as though poisoned by a co-maker's curse, but indignation seized his soul and he rallied his physical forces for the task at hand.

"O. K.!" he snarled with great bitterness. "Keep the dough, but I'll sell the midget broadcaster today as a personal project. I'll hock my watch!"

He stormed from the room marked "Conference" and entered the adjacent office for his hat. Then he charged through the reception room, only to be halted at the doorknob by Sophie's ambiguous double talk.

"Mr. Feder, Mr. Feder says to wait, to wait a minute," she cooed.

Brother Jake was already in the reception room, and cash was in his hand. He counted out thirty-five dollars.

Joe protested. "Only thirty-five—"

"You couldn't get more'n ten on that watch," Jake interrupted. "So thirty-five's a windfall. With me this is a gross error."

"You're lucky I didn't dig up my own personal bank roll."

"Where does the demonstration take place?" said Jake with a sigh as the last

of the money was counted.

"At the Kings County Jockey Club!" Joe replied, rushing from the office.

"What would jockeys want with midget broadcasters?" Jake muttered, and, with a sigh, turned to the court calendar as presented in his favorite reading matter, the *Law Journal.*

CONSIDERABLE doubt and no little consternation clouded the welcome accorded Joe Feder when he finally reached the scene of his appointment, which was an apartment just down the street from the entrance to the Kings County Jockey Club. The doubt was confined to Egon Hauser, inventive genius on whom Joe Feder hoped some day to realize uncountable wealth. Consternation was supplied by a pair of scowling friends introduced by Egon as Mr. Knight and Mr. Flemm, known as Blackie and Artie to their friends, of whom Hauser was now one. They preferred a curt nod to a handshake.

"Dutchie said you'd be here an hour ago," Knight began.

"Yeah, an hour," Artie added with a nod of affirmation that paralleled his speech.

"Caught in traffic," Joe explained. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but there are some things we cannot control. Traffic is one of 'em."

"Can y' control this midget gadget?" Blackie countered.

"Gentlemen," Feder beamed, rubbing his hands briskly. "Words do not fail me, but I know you do not pay off on words. You want a demonstration. We are prepared to give it."

"Where's the outfit?" Knight asked.

"Yeah, where?" Artie added.

Joe Feder laid a parental arm about Egon Hauser's shoulder. The inventor's florid face broke into a smile of delight.

"First," Feder said, "may we know the name of the firm we are dealing with?"

"Yes," Knight replied. "Infamation, Inc."

"Information, Inc.," Feder echoed with a nod. "An' where is the demonstration to take place?"

Artie Flemm pointed to the floor.

"Right here," Blackie growled. "That is, part of it. We want th' stuff t' come in here. The broadcastin' some place else."

"Nut doo far avay," Hauser warned. "My set vouldn't be doo bowerful like a netsvoik radio."

"Th' set-up is this," Blackie said, lowering his voice and motioning them close. "Artie stays here to catch what we send. Th' t'ree of us goes out an' does a bitta talkin' t'rough the afternoon. We come back here. If Artie says it's O. K., we'll fix up a deal."

"To-to*day?*" Joe Feder said with a gulp.

"Why wait?" Blackie asked with a shrug. "Now the set."

Egon Hauser reached into the inside pocket of his overcoat and produced a box no larger than a cigarette case, though slightly thicker. He laid it on a nearby table with great gentleness. Blackie Knight peered at it, and doubt cloaked his uninviting features.

"This is too small!" he bellowed.

"It's too midget?" Hauser asked. "Vot difference how small, so long as the noice, it's bik?"

Joe Feder jumped in. "Mr. Hauser is right, gentlemen," he said. "The entire outfit is small. The volume is tremendous. Now, where do we go for the demonstration?"

Still doubting, Blackie Knight held a

whispered conversation with Artie, who nodded his answers with a constant agitation of his red head. Then Knight led the way downstairs and through the street. They crossed over to the Kings County Jockey Club, where Knight led Feder to the ticket booth.

"Buy t'ree clubhouse tickets," he ordered.

Feder produced his recently acquired bank roll and purchased tickets as directed. He was completely mystified and looked it.

"This . . . this is a *race*track!" he exclaimed.

"Do tell!" Blackie chuckled.

"Vait!" Hauser ordered. "Ve vouldn't haf dime to vaste on aminals —bleese—ve make foist the demonstration."

Blackie thumbed in the direction of the park. "Can you suggest a better place?" he asked. "Crowds—noises—gallopin' nags—people yellin'—an' all that?"

Joe Feder's face took on a mask of sudden intelligence. "He's right, Egon," Feder exclaimed. "This'll be perfect."

"It better be," Blackie muttered, leading the way.

"After all, Egon," the promoter continued with rising enthusiasm, "we've tested the midget set only with close-up voices. If it can pick up distant sounds, color—why, this is the time to find out!"

The trio paused on the expanse of lawn before the grandstand. It was close to one o'clock, and the crowd was yet to come, there being only a scattered few in the seats, a few more in the infield, and scarcely a dozen on the lawn. Blackie Knight drank in the entire panorama with a sweeping glance and then turned to Hauser.

"O. K., let's start the experiment," he whispered. "Where's the sendin' outfit?"

Hauser nodded. "Ve are aboud the same size," he said, "so ve shange overcoads."

"Then what?" Blackie said, still doubting, but removing his garment just the same.

"Fids you poifect," Hauser chuckled, and smoothed the back. "Pud in your right-hant bocket your right hant. There you vill find a liddle, tiny svits. Schnep the svits—so!" He snapped his fingers without making a sound. "Ant voteffer goess on, goess ofer the radio set."

Blackie Knight nodded, peered about a bit, and then grinned.

"You mean whatever I'm sayin' kin be heard by Artie?" he asked, and as Hauser nodded, he continued: "You mean if I tell the early prices on the board, Artie kin hear me? Like this: Dairy Maid, twenny-one bucks, Westover, fourteen-forty, Kashmira, eighty-two. Artie kin hear that?"

"What's to prevent it?" Joe Feder asked.

"A very good question," Blackie observed with a sneering smile. "So good a question that we better find out right now if anyt'ing is preventin' it. Come on!"

He snapped off the power and led the way once more, this time to the public telephone booths. There he called a number, which proved to be in the apartment down the street.

"Hello, Artie? . . . Yeah. . . . What? . . . We just did. . . . Sure, I did. . . . Gave you the first-line prices on the first race. Called your name like I said I would. . . . No? . . . Sure you had it on all the time? . . . Well, th' guys must be nuts. . . . Yeah. . . . Be right over."

He emerged from the booth with his swarthy face bathed in a frown that would scare Orson Welles. He was yanking off the coat when Hauser rushed forward.

"Bleese!" the inventor pleaded. "Eassy—dake it eassy—vot heppened? Dun't drop the coad!"

"You're a pair of crackpots!" Blackie muttered, and regained his coat from Hauser.

"Just a minute!" Joe Feder bristled.

"Take off th' disguise," Blackie growled, and emphasized his order with a clenched fist. "Th' set don't woik. Artie didn't get anyt'ing—not a price, not a voice."

"Bud—bud," Hauser stammered, "he got noice—*some* noice?"

"Justa buzz," Blackie replied. "But we gotta have more'n a buzz. I kin get a buzz from any kinda set."

"This never happened before," Joe Feder murmured.

"It'll never happen again, either," Blackie chuckled. "Nice seein' ya, boys. So long!"

They trailed Blackie Knight from the park. Egon Hauser was completely befuddled, and Joe Feder was in the rare predicament—for him—of being speechless. Naturally, the wordless state did not last long. He was at Blackie's side with an appeal.

"What'd you come out for?" Blackie asked. "You wasted tickets for today's races."

"Money!" Feder muttered with great disdain. "A mere drop-it-in-the-bucket. You haven't given the midget set a fair break."

Blackie shrugged. "All I asked, mister," he said, "was that the set do what I wanted. It didn't, so—"

"Vait!" Hauser shouted. "Look!"

Knight and Feder turned to behold the inventor pointing to a small, com-

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pact brick building.

"Vot's thot?" he demanded.

"Th' power plant," Blackie explained, "It's an auxiliary outfit to kick the juice along aroun' here. Why?"

"Vy?" Hauser shouted. "Ha, ha! Vot's to prevent it, Feder said. So thot's preventing the midget set from operating."

"Exactly!" Feder echoed. "That plant is giving off power—so much power the little set hasn't a chance. Now, if we could go somewhere else, like in Central Park—"

"They don't race horses in Central Park!" Blackie Knight sneered. "I want the demonstration here—where I said."

Feder slapped his hands. "It'll work, Mr. Knight!" he exclaimed. "I was right. The set hasn't had a fair shake. I've heard this thing operate. I *know* what it can do. An' by the way, you haven't said what you'll pay if the set does what you ask."

Blackie Knight halted and eyed the promoter sternly.

"If it'll do what I want, which is no more than you claim," he muttered, "I'll pay you five hundred bucks a day t' use it!"

Joe Feder was swallowing rapidly in order to let the words escape his throat. He licked his thin lips and nodded.

"O. K., but I want dough in advance," he whispered. "Cross my palm—rather, give me five hundred. I'll give it to Hauser. You can take Hauser back to the apartment as a token of good faith. You and I'll go back to that racetrack—rather, I'll meet you there at two o'clock. If the set doesn't work, you can take the five hundred back from Hauser!"

Blackie shrugged. "Fair enough," he said, and produced a wad of bills. He peeled off a single portrait of William McKinley and handed it to Feder, who passed it to Hauser. "Now what?"

"Take Hauser back to the apartment,"

Feder directed. "I'll meet you at the racetrack gate—two o'clock!"

FACED with an opportunity of making five hundred dollars a day, Joe Feder was not one to try anything but the shortest cuts to success. As a result, he was at the gate of the racetrack on time, and with a face that beamed from the happy prospects of success. Blackie Knight stood at the side, surrounded by half-smoked cigarette butts, which indicated both the duration of his wait and a certain degree of apprehension. He nodded toward the ticket booth. With a painful frown, Joe Feder purchased two more admission tags. Knight led the way to the lawn, but now a goodly crowd had assembled. In fact, it was hard to move around without jostling somebody.

"Stick close to me," Knight directed. "We got to do some fast talkin', but don't say too much. Get what I mean?"

"Yes," Feder said, "don't talk too much."

"I mean we don't want anybody else to know what an important thing we're handlin'," Blackie explained. "Now, for instance, I see where they got Dairy Maid down t' seventeen eighty, Westover up over twenny—twenny ten, to be exact, an' enough suckers've bet on Kashmira t' force th' price down t' sixty-one thirty. Artie'll be glad t' hear that. Wish Artie was here today. He'd be glad t' hear about th' rest of the line."

Whereupon he recited the remaining prices of the entire field of eleven fillies that were to start in the opening race of the day's program. He called off the two late scratches, a jockey change, a late apprentice allowance claimed and granted, and the condition of the track, which was as perfect as the spring weather.

"Come on, Feder," Knight said, tugging the promoter's sleeve. "I got to make a phone call."

With heart heavy from apprehension, Joe Feder followed the doubting Thomas to the telephone booth once more. But this time Blackie dashed from the receptacle with his face wreathed in an enormous smile. He caved in Feder's bony back with a wallop of congratulations.

"Perfect!" he exclaimed. "Artie says it came in like a tornado. Can't believe it. That little thing on the table, he said, is talkin' like a giant. An' "—he grinned sheepishly—"Artie says my radio voice ain't bad a-tall."

It was a glorious experience for Joe Feder. Success had crowned his efforts at last, and even brother Jake would have to admit that five hundred dollars a day for the rental of a single midget set was success in any language. Moreover, the dough was already paid. There was no risk, no waiting.

So great was his Elysian delight that the rising price on Kashmira got the best of him. He had never bet on a horse before, but when Blackie Knight explained that two dollars on the filly Kashmira might return a profit of more than three thousand percent, he made a beeline for the two-dollar window for his baptismal bet.

Blackie Knight opened the "svits" two minutes before post time and rattled off the final prices for the initial race, but he recited them to Joe Feder.

"You're tellin' me!" the promoter exclaimed. "I can see them."

Blackie ignored the comment and continued as the horses paraded on to the track headed by Redcoat Murray. Now he gave the numbers according to the program listing, described the physical condition, or what he could see of it, and kept with them until the familiar roar,

"They're off!" shook the grandstand and the midget set as well.

With that Joe Feder began to scream a shrilly tenor in the hope that its penetrating quality might reach Kashmira or her jockey and prod them to speed heretofore unknown to animal racing. Whether Feder's outcrying reached them or not, Kashmira took on the appearance of a shepherd dog heel-biting the flock to the barnyard.

As the hapless beast fell farther behind, Joe Feder's screeching tenor rose in pitch, and he gave vent to his feelings by jumping up and down on the green bench. Halfway through the six-furlong race, he sensed that fate was about to deal him a foul blow, for Kashmira had been left behind as though passed by a tornado. Feder began to berate the filly and blaspheme the jockey's antecedents from one generation to the next.

But his final high-pitched shout of indignation came as the leaders galloped past their vantage point at the finish line, and the disillusioned promoter found himself plummeted headlong from the bench by a cruel slug to the side of his jaw. Before he could identify his assailant, he was practically trampled on by the entire group that raced over the lawn toward the mutuel windows. By the time he rose, Blackie Knight was reciting the pay-off prices as reported by the flashing lights of the totalizator board.

Joe Feder bristled again. "Look here you—"

"You look!" Knight muttered savagely. "I gotta call Artie, an' if your hoot-owl screechin' over a two-buck bet has ruined my broadcast, I'll bust you right between the nose. Come on!"

Still ruffled, the promoter followed, regaining both dignity and composure as he trailed the outraged Knight. By the time Blackie emerged from the telephone booth, all signs of temper had left both. Blackie nodded.

"Lucky for you it came over O. K.," he muttered. "But hereafter keep y' trap shut, except when I talk to ya. Then answer, an' keep quiet again. This is important. D'ya think I pay a half a gran' just t' spend th' afternoon in the sun?"

"I . . . a . . . I'm sorry," Feder apologized. "My enthusiasm for Kashmira got the best of me."

"Or maybe it was that price," Knight chuckled. "She's a dog. Jus' like her ol' man, Kashdan. Imported. Couldn't go the distance, an' his get can't even go a little distance. They're bums, but as long as suckers like you come to the park in hopes of gettin' rich on a single race, all the Kashmiras in the world'll have backin'."

"It was just a lark with me," Feder sniffed. "What now?"

"We gotta get the early prices on the nex' race to Artie."

BLACKIE KNIGHT systematized the chore through the next half-hour, and he made sure that Joe Feder steered clear of the mutuel windows.

"Don't be a sucker for another guy's pitch," he warned.

"An' by the way," Feder said, "if you don't bet on the races, what are you broadcastin' for?"

Blackie shrugged. "Let's say it's for a sick friend who can't get out inta this glorious sunshine," he confided. "That's it. We're doin' it for a pal who has no patience an' wants all the news pronto."

"An' it's worth five hundred?"

"Worth a million!" Blackie whispered. "Wait, here's a change in old Tippicanoe. We'll give it to Artie."

And Blackie Knight passed the price

changes, shifts in jockeys, and a couple of items picked up in the paddock. Joe Feder watched now with tremendous interest. He began to wonder about the exact reason for all these details. Surely the exciting details couldn't improve any sick friend's health.

And so, after the running of the second race, a dash for four-year-olds, Joe Feder began a campaign to obtain a declaration of success from Knight. They went to the telephone booth again.

"Artie says it was perfect again," Knight said, beaming.

"So, the deal is on—O. K.?" the proter parried.

"On'y two races gone," Blackie returned. "We got five more t' go. There's the Butterfly Stakes, an' the Urban Handicap. That's what we're really interested in. Fifth an' sixth races."

"But I'm thinking of Hauser," Feder murmured. "Why couldn't Hauser come out here with us? He spends so much time in that damp cellar of his. I'd like to get him in the sunshine."

"Oh, no!" Blackie laughed. "He sits right there till we prove this thing's O. K."

"What more proof d'ya want?" Feder demanded.

"Sh-h-h-h!"

"Shush for what?" the promoter went on. "We've kept our bargain. I want Hauser here with me. Suppose you snapped a wire in that coat—"

"Are you nuts!" Blackie Knight roared. He peered around cautiously. "I tell you t' pipe down."

"I want Egon Hauser here! An' I won't—"

"O. K., addlepate," Blackie muttered. "Only gag y'self. I'll tell Artie t' send him over after this next race. But if anything—"

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reclaim your cash," Joe finished. "Keepin' him there any longer makes it seem like a kidnapin'. The man's a genius."

Blackie Knight waved him to silence and continued with his chore of passing on information pertaining to the third race, a mile and a sixteenth for three-year-old maidens. Prior to this race he was able to announce the scratching of Bold Man from the Urban Handicap, a fact not yet announced at the track. He also broadcast to Artie a twenty-five-thousand-dollar wager made by two millionaires in the clubhouse. He promised the name of the horse later, but stated that it had been made on a filly in the Butterfly Stakes.

And so it went, a complete mystery to Joe Feder, who trailed Blackie Knight until the running of the third race. To all appearances, he and Blackie were discussing the horses, the odds and the race itself, as thousands of nearby racing enthusiasts were doing. With the third race over, Knight kept his promise and ordered Hauser over to fix a wire in the overcoat. The inventor appeared within a few minutes, breathless and worried.

"It's O. K., Dutchie," Knight grinned. "I jus' wanted t' make sure y' didn't run off with that heavy sugar."

"Sugar?" Hauser echoed.

"The dough," Feder explained. "An' have you got it?"

"Oh, yah," Hauser nodded, and, after a heart-taxing search of his pockets, produced the crumpled bill.

As soon as he could get Hauser alone, Feder ferried him over to the large mutuel window, where the clerk changed the five hundred dollars into ten bills of fifty dollars each. He pocketed half and Hauser kept the rest.

"We have already rendered valuable service," the promoter whispered. "The next race will be the fourth—more than half the program. Should anything happen—"

"Nodding could heppen," Hauser insisted. "So long as he doesn't vafe his arms un scnep a vire, udder the svits."

"Good!" Feder sighed. "Let's get back. It's a great day, Egon, an' our future is a rosy one indeed. My brother Jake—"

His words were drowned by the roar that heralded the start of the fourth race. Joe Feder observed that Blackie Knight was especially careful of this broadcast, moved frequently and spoke with great caution. Still, he was no different from his neighbors. To Egon Hauser it was a mad, senseless world, and he sat upon one of the green benches to contemplate the utter degradation to which mankind had descended. He had spent the past two hours trying to fathom the reason for the midget broadcasts, and now he was more at sea than ever. Men and women were shrieking. Another man was using the product of the Hauser brain to transmit the progress of horses in flight. A block away another man was relaying the information through a telephone. And they called inventors crazy!

"WHAT does it mean," Joe Feder asked, "when the people rush around here screamin' that the price on Gadfly has been ganged?"

Knight shrugged. "The price went down," he said. "Somebody got a hunch, an' the panic is on."

"The money's comin' from outside," a stranger explained. "Dough has been wired in for the past half-hour. Somebody knows somethin'."

"How do those things leak out?" Knight wondered aloud.

"The Pinkertons'll find out," the stranger laughed. "They're goin' through this track like a pack of bloodhounds."

It was true, as Blackie Knight realized. The Pinkertons, those minions of law and order at the racetrack, all-seeing, all-hearing, were scouring the scene for signs of the leak. How did the world beyond these portals know of the tremendous bet on Gadfly? How did the world know that Bold Man would be scratched long before the stewards were apprised of his bruised frog?

The result had thrown the track into a panic. Money from all over had poured into the track to be poured into the mutuel machines on Gadfly. The price had plunged to even money, and the two millionaire gamblers who had bet with a clubhouse bookmaker demanded that the governor of the State appear at once and investigate the leak. And the owners of Bold Man were target for accusations. Bold Man had been a betting favorite. A delay of his scratching had kept other prices up. From outside the track came a switch of betting to be distributed among the rest of the field. Prices sank, and the racetrack crowd howled like the victim of a swindle.

Was it a swindle? Joe Feder didn't know. He hadn't quite found his bearings. Egon Hauser might have been impaled on the Matterhorn, for all he knew. He was impaled upon something, but his bewilderment was assuaged by the fact that his midget broadcasting set worked; that his aggressive friend, Joe Feder, was reaping a harvest for them.

But was it working? A sudden roar of protest from the crowd was epitomized by a roar of protest from Blackie Knight. He demanded in a loud voice a reason for the lack of lighted numbers on the totalizator board. He and fifteen thousand other people were in the dark as to what the starters would pay in the Butterfly Stakes. No lights on the

board. Blackie Knight turned toward the grandstand. Strange. No lights anywhere.

Blackie Knight passed the information to Joe Feder, and the promoter's face turned a greenish hue, which Blackie failed to notice.

Feder nodded and moved close to Hauser's side. The inventor was wholly preoccupied with thoughts foreign to the emergency at hand. And when Joe Feder suggested that they move to a less crowded spot, Hauser followed. Removed from hearing, Feder said:

"Look, Egon, this excitement's too much for you. We've earned three hundred bucks. Here's an extra fifty. Take the dough an' beat it back to your house. I'll call for you tonight."

"Wha— Ve got to finish the job," Hauser protested.

"You've done all you could," the promoter said, urging him toward the exit gates. "The set made good. Go on, now, I'll see you later."

Still bewildered, Hauser drifted from the racetrack.

Heralded by a roar from the racetrack crowd, the lights went up and Joe Feder's already-taxed heart went down as though punctured with a broadsword. Of course, Knight continued broadcasting. He conveyed the last-minute odds, announced the parade of horses and then broadcast the race.

Joe Feder stood at his side, listening, too chilled to speak, partly by his fear and partly by the excitement of seeing a batch of great two-year-old fillies struggle for a rich purse. And no wonder the excitement over Gadfly. She ran as though one were on her flank burying deep its claws and tongue. She had been under wraps, but now, uncovered, she made a show of the field and streaked home at a price of less than even money.

"And so another financial coopy has bit the dust," Blackie Knight chuckled. "Somebody tried to put one over, but we fooled 'em."

"Wha-what happened to the lights?" Joe Feder asked.

"Over at that little powerhouse," Blackie explained, "I hear they went in an' found the engineer blind drunk, an' the generators absolutely still."

"Power just faded out from the big plant," a nearby stranger offered. "But they threw in a switch an' started the little one up again. Boy, I'd hate to be in that engineer's shoes."

"Come on," Blackie said. "Let's call Artie. Where's Hauser?"

"He . . . went over to rest up," Feder said. "Blackie, somebody wants you—"

Blackie turned, and turned pale.

"Pinkertons!" he cried in obvious dismay.

As he cried, a firm and heavy hand gripped his shoulder. Blackie squirmed, but in vain.

"I don't like your actions, you outlaw Ted Husing," the Pinkerton growled. "Come on to the clubhouse."

"For what?" Blackie demanded in what Joe Feder admired as a brilliant front. "You got nothin' on me!"

"But you may have somethin' on yourself," the officer returned, and gripped harder. "Come on, you know the rule of the track. If we're wrong, you're better off."

"What's it all about?" Knight bluffed. "Tell me in a word an' I'll go. Otherwise I won't, an' you can't make me without a warrant. You know that."

"Somebody's got a radio on this track," the Pinkerton muttered. "You haven't made a bet all day. You've been talking to yourself. You've been acting too suspicious for words. If you haven't

got the thing on you, you know something about it. Now get on."

As the Pinkerton thrust him forward, Blackie lurched to the side, tore loose from the grip, and darted into the gathering throng. He headed for the mutuel windows, where the crowd was heaviest. A dozen or more uniformed patrolmen and countless plain-clothes cops moved in an enormous human wedge, aiming at the windows, and then at the exit gates. But the Pinkerton who had apprehended the suspect stood motionless, amazed by the fact that his quarry had slipped like an eel, leaving him grasping only an empty topcoat. With that Joe Feder, president of Ace Promotions, Inc., edged into the milling throng just in time to hear the Pinkerton say:

"Where's his buddy? Somebody stop him."

Joe Feder remained motionless, staring as part of the packed throng. He turned with the others, meditating the while on the sorry end to which Egon Hauser's midget broadcasting set had come. Should he claim the nefarious machine or abandon it to fate and Pinkertons? To be sure, Jake Feder was a good lawyer and could get anybody out of anything. Yet, Jake wasn't infallible, and Joe Feder was practically a free man now.

Besides, Egon Hauser's invention had been the instrument by which dishonesty

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By and large, Joe Feder concluded as he moved noiselessly in the direction of the exit gates, it was a job well done. Once again Egon Hauser had built a successful midget radio. That was more important than anything else. Now, with a bit of bank roll, he could start Hauser working again on the circular-picture film.

"Fetter!"

The promoter's blood chilled once more, and he halted as though paralyzed. Visions of Atlanta from the East wing filled his closed eyes, and crystallized when a hand touched his shoulder.

"How the deffil do ve get oud from here?"

"Hauser!" Feder gulped. "I told you to go home."

"Vich vay—vere am I?" the inventor exclaimed with a shrug. "Besides, my coad. I got here Mr. Knight's coad. My radio—"

"Everything's safe, Egon," Feder whispered, and sighed. "That is, for a while. I . . . I told Mr. Knight to send the coat and set back. Come on, here's a taxi."

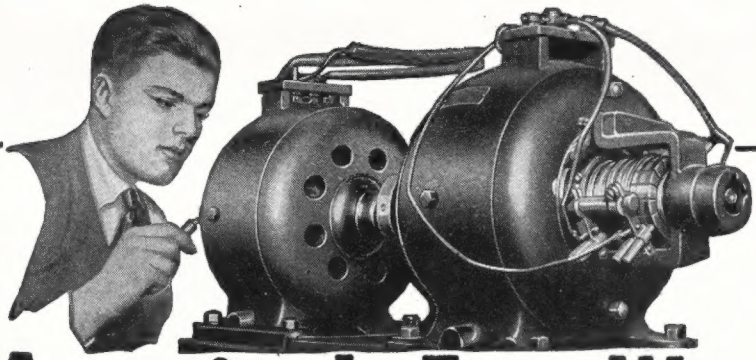
They got in. Hauser settled back. Then he said, "Dit you gif him my eddress?"

"I told him," Feder parried. "I hope he don't forget it."

Hauser laughed. "It's O. K.," he said. "My eddress iss on the inside of the inside çoad bocket."

Flushed with the success of his brain child, Egon Hauser was too elated to notice that Joe Feder had fainted.

THE END.



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